Iatrochemical Healing in Shakespeare and Donne: The Diseased and Cured Body in the English Literary Imagination, 1590-1638

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY
OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

BY

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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

David Haley, Advisor

April 2013
Acknowledgements

I wish to express my deepest gratitude to my advisor, David Haley. His insightful feedback, continual support and encouragement, and exceptional abilities as a mentor and editor drove this project to completion. I am grateful for his attention to the shortcomings and strengths of my ideas as the dissertation developed through the rocky early stages, and for his perseverance in helping me to improve on what I had done.

I thank John Watkins, chair of my committee, for sharing his passion of reading the past through engaging his students. I have notebooks full of his graduate seminar insights.

I thank Tom Clayton for serving on my committee, and for insisting that we take our authors seriously. My passion for John Donne began in his poetry seminar.

I thank Jole Shackelford for many hours of discussion and coffee during seminars in History of Medicine. Where I oversimplify or butcher medicine in the dissertation, I hope it reflects my budding fascination with the history and not Jole’s mastery.

My parents, Dr. Jeff and Kathy Larkin, deserve more thanks than I could possibly express. They taught me to read early and to read often. They supported me every moment of my life, in every way. Thank you, Mom and Dad. You are the best.

I thank Keith and Dr. Torild Homstad for constant encouragement and moral support. I thank Andy, Tippy, Chloe, Hans, Jodi, Haakon, and the rest of my family for constant positivity. Friends near and far, the fantastic people of the Seward neighborhood, my colleagues and students at Minnesota and UW-Stout, and every teacher I have had in my 26 years as a student, I thank you. You are all awesome people.
For Maia

My Best Beloved
Abstract

English authors near the beginning of the seventeenth century explore and exploit tensions between traditional Galenic and newer Paracelsian models of contagion and cure. Medicine is both a subject and a metaphor. Shakespeare and Donne are skeptical about medicine’s ability to cure. They treat new ideas cautiously yet allow room for the potential utility of chemical medicines and modern anatomies. Shakespeare engages the Galen-Paracelsus debate in *All’s Well That Ends Well*, ultimately presenting an alchemical female healer superior to both schools. Comparison with *King John* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor* reveals Shakespeare’s move away from traditional humoral medicine so satirized in the period toward a newer medicine based on chemical models of contagion and cure. The later plays then drift away from the debate toward concepts of cosmic sympathies. Donne’s poetry and prose works demonstrate a medical understanding of the ailing body that allows him to test and exceed the boundaries of both metaphor and the human body. Attention to anatomical detail provides Donne with rich imagery for exploring his complex personal brand of dualism. In the ecstatic writings, including *Ignatius His Conclave* and *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*, Donne shows complicated condemnation and exaltation of chemical medicines as both physic and metaphorical vehicle. Francis Bacon’s *New Atlantis* presents a utopian quasi-scientific community that includes explicit research facilities for chemical medicines. Robert Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy* demonstrates the limitations of humoral medicine and explicitly encourages laboratory alchemy for the production of nonorganic medicines.
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Chapter One

There is No Health: An Introduction to the Project

Nicholas Breton’s forty-page prose work *The Good and the Badde, or Descriptions of the Worthies and Unworthies of This Age* is a handbook of expectations for the citizens of 1616 London. It presents sets of character comparisons, in which a brief encomium of a “worthy” character is followed by vituperation of the “unworthy” example. We see how a king, a lawyer, a bishop, a judge, or a young man ought to and ought not to behave. Sandwiched between the soldier and the merchant—at the lazy untrained coward and before the swindler—we find the physician.

A Worthy Physician

A worthy physician is the enemy of sickness, in purging nature from corruption. His action is most in feeling of pulses, and his discourses chiefly of the natures of diseases. He is a great searcher out of simples, and accordingly makes his composition. He persuades abstinence and patience for the benefit of health, while purging and bleeding are the chief courses of his counsel. The Apothecary and the Surgeon are his two chief attendants, with whom conferring upon time, grows temperate in his cures. Surfeits and wantonness are great agents for his employment, when by the secret of his skill, out of others weakness he gathers his own strength. In sum, he is a necessary member for an unnecessary malady, to find a disease and to cure the diseased.

While the first line syntactically suggests removing what is natural from a body of corruption, it is safe to assume Breton demonstrates rhetorical hyperbaton typical of works in this period, and we can translate it to read “purging corruption from [out of] nature.” Characterized in active, warlike conflict against disease, the physician’s role is

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1 I have modernized the spelling of passages from Breton.
one of separation: nature on one side, corruption on the other. These remain common tropes: modern advertising on city bus shelters presents expert physicians surrounded by soft fonts, pastel colors, and diction dripping with positive connotation. The concept of separating corrupt from pure is at least scriptural in age. Most noteworthy for this study is the presentation of the physician in the second sentence: the worthy physician feels for a pulse and is conversant in the ways diseases occur and develop. He is hands-on and competent. The pursuit of “simples,” or basic herbal remedies, combined with a guidance-counselor’s promotion of self-control and patience, add up to a medical professional who follows established traditional methods and acts on them carefully. The need for careful consideration is repeated in the “conferring upon time” with his druggist and surgeon, and the “temperate” nature of his cures. Nothing is drastic, nothing is new, nothing is imbalanced or out of control. In fact, the physical and immoral excesses of the populace perversely guarantee the physician’s job security through the creation of more disease. The last line presents the physician as a kind of somatic Orkin man, here to find the rodent and clear the house: he would not have needed to be called if we had been more careful about the dishes, food, and garbage.

An Unworthy Physician

An unlearned and so unworthy physician is a kind of horse-leech whose cure is most in drawing of blood and a desperate purge either to cure or kill as it hits. His discourse is most of the cures that he hath done and them far off. And not a receipt under a hundred pounds though it be not worth three half pence. Upon the market day he is much haunted with urinals where if he find anything (though he know nothing) yet he will say somewhat, which if it hit to some purpose, with a few fustian words, he will seem a piece of strange stuff. He is never without old merry tales, and stale jests to make old folks laugh, and comfits, or plums in his pocket, to please the little children. Yea, and he will be talking of complexions,
though he know nothing of their dispositions. And if his medicine do a feat, he is a made man among fools. But being wholly unlearned, and oftentimes unhonest let me thus briefly describe him: He is a plain kind of mountebank, and a true quacksalver, a danger for the sick to deal withal, and a dizard in the world to talk withal.

This description is a vituperative catalogue drawn from the period’s vocabulary of negative medical stereotypes. We should note that the first word used to characterize the unworthy physician is “unlearned,” whereas the worthy physician’s education or credentials are not directly addressed. The unschooled, smarmy con artist is both dangerous and obnoxious. He is lucky sometimes, but does not understand even basic humoral theory and thus bleeds his patients excessively and purges them desperately. He performs publicly on the market day, like a bloodletting carnie. This urine-gazer’s successful cures are geographically distant and unverifiable. Ultimately, the unworthy physician is more likely to kill than to cure.

If we compare the two physicians, we can see most of the contrast (other than in tone and connotation of language) in bedside manner. The worthy physician is calm and patient, the unworthy is a schmoozy fraud, a doofus, a “dizard.” It is worth noting that the word “cure” occurs only once in the context of the worthy physician, who is praised mostly for his manner and consideration—there is no allusion to his statistically significant higher rate of curing his patients. Our modern concept of quantifiable progress, of faith in some kind of coherent and consistent medical development, is absent from the major writers I shall discuss. Ultimately, we must recognize that Breton is describing a widely-held view of the role of medicine in an early seventeenth-century world where Providence and decay are very present realities.
Also published in 1616 is a text that provides this intellectual, conceptual background for the roles of Providence and decay. Godfrey Goodman’s work on the fall of man and the corruption of nature is discussed at length by Victor Irwin Harris in his 1949 study *All Coherence Gone: A Study of the Seventeenth Century Controversy over Disorder and Decay in the Universe*. Goodman presents the popular understanding that the seeds of decay are present in everything, resulting in the corruption and decay of both man and the natural world. “The tendency to decay, the privative necessity for returning to nothing, once it has been put into effect by the Fall, is, according to Goodman, implemented by the contrary motions in perpetual conflict throughout nature” (Harris 31). Harris summarizes Goodman in a way that is relevant for framing this entire project of disease, contagion, and healing—especially as will be seen in John Donne’s obsession with ecstasy: not only does the natural world fall apart, but “The corruption is also in the natural restrictions upon the body. The soul cannot leave and return. Man cannot converse with angels” (Harris 37). Man’s inherent propensity toward decay and sickness thus manifests itself as a barrier to both physical and metaphysical perfection.

The purpose of the current study is to explore the ways in which major English authors near the turn of the seventeenth century interact with contemporary medical debates and developments. John Donne’s *The First Anniversary, An Anatomy of the World* (1611), succinctly introduces the complications arising from scientific publication at the time:

And new Philosophy calls all in doubt,

The Element of fire is quite put out;
The Sun is lost, and th’earth, and no mans wit
Can well direct him where to looke for it.
And freely men confesse that this world’s spent,
When in the Planets, and the Firmament
They seeke so many new; they see that this
Is crumbled out againe to his Atomies.
‘Tis all in peeces, all cohaerence gone. (Lines 205-13)

These lines have been given much attention by historians of astronomy and
natural philosophy. Donne’s diction demonstrates the pervasive feeling of decay, cosmic
instability, and uncertainty: doubt, out, lost, spent, seek, crumbled, pieces, and ultimately
(the title chosen by Harris for his book), all coherence gone. Decay in the macrocosm is
the direct result of decay in the microcosm (Harris 42).

This sense of accelerated mutability is found both in macrocosm and reciprocally
microcosm. Forty lines earlier in the Anatomy, Donne inserts a bellicose couplet on
man’s current medical condition: “With new diseases on our selves we warre, / And with
new Physicke, a worse Engin farre” (159-60). A relative explosion of vernacular medical
treatises before and during this period may reflect a growing paranoia: a doubt whether
newer chemical theories of healing (iatrochemistry) are more likely than traditional
approaches to kill or cure. Classical humoral models of the body are called into question
and defended, and human anatomies are praised or derided. There continues to be no true
agreement over how the body works, how disease gains footholds in the body, or even
what the nature of disease really is. It is not enough to say that certain major authors in
the period sometimes mention medicine or disease or healing—such topics are central to
the human experience and can be found in the literature of any period. Unique to the period in question is how the authors seem to be exploring and exploiting the tension between the traditional Hippocratic/Galenic and the newer Paracelsian models of disease and cure. These models themselves, as we will see throughout this study, do not necessarily present in “pure” forms the doctrine of Paracelsus or Galen. The Galenic tradition, no doubt exaggerated by medical conservatives, is one that survived through and was mostly shaped by the middle ages—it is a nebulous corpus that, like the Hippocratic corpus, expanded well beyond what are likely true primary texts: the study of Galen is augmented with the study of Galenism. And while Paracelsianism is still relatively young at the turn of the seventeen century, it is subject to similar reinterpretations of what the field means for those using it at the time.

In order to discuss the authors’ uses of medical models and debates, we must first identify those moments where their language evidently interacts with medicine. It is not enough that their subject is a diseased body or even a physician. The language itself must point to or at least echo the language of medical treatises and debates. Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* is one major text from this period that continually engages disease, injury, and healing, but ultimately does not engage current medical debate. After his confrontation with Orgoglio, the Red Cross Knight is being healed by the leech Patience, who applies topical treatments to the Knight’s wounds (I.x.24). This alone is not noteworthy medicine. The intriguing element is the decidedly non-Hippocratic language in the following stanza, where the “cause and root” of the Red Cross Knight’s condition is what Patience needs to “extirpe” (I.x.25.1,6). Traditional humoral imagery follows,
Patience finally attempting to remove a fleshly internal superfluity with the fascinating approach “To pluck it out with pincers fyrie whott” (I.x.26.8). The model of disease entering the body as a seed, growing roots in the body, and ultimately needing to be pulled from the body *seems* Paracelsian in nature. This might suggest Spenser’s meaningful engagement with Paracelsian medicine in *The Faerie Queene*.

Of course, a Paracelsian reading of this passage is overwhelmed by the spiritual and baptismal metaphor. Each subsequent attempt at reading current medical debates into the medicines, diseases, or injuries in the epic poem can be excised by applying Ockham’s Razor until nothing remains but medieval humoralism and spiritual cure. Spenser really has use only for triage. Even physical bodily harm is not an occasion to explore medicine qua medicine: each injury, accident, battle-wound, or lingering illness is a cosmic spanking to correct some moral or spiritual slight. Each cut, bruise, slice, and splinter is hijacked and impressed into the work’s incessant allegory. Patience is not a character of commentary on medicine, but a shoehorn for the moral imperative of Book One. In Book Three, Timias’s soul-sickness—his drawn-out, complicated lovelorn bodily ailment that can be cured only by that which caused it—is grounded in love, not Paracelsianism. The humoralism, combined with the spirit/body connection, is so rampant as to make the concept of the human body in Spenser blatantly medieval. Even the blood (and oh, how much blood!) does not really address historical or contemporary triage—it is a lubricant for the moral machinery. Spenser would have enjoyed the blood-flooded hallway scenes of the film *The Shining*. 
Donne differs from Spenser distinctively in his use of contemporary medical concepts. And in Shakespeare, although his early works are decidedly humoral in nature, we find a shift toward inclusion of the iatrochemical in his later works. What is significant about the ways in which the major authors write about iatrochemical healing? Why do they incorporate it into their works? Do they ultimately believe that they are living in a time of meaningful progress and change, led by significant advancements in medical science? The short answers to these questions are “the fact that they write about it at all,” “because it is prominent in the intellectual ether at the moment,” and “no.” The long answers are hopefully to be found in the body of this dissertation.

For a point of entry into exploring the wilderness of this discussion, we must realize that Shakespeare and Donne would find our idea of progress utterly incomprehensible. Progress in the twenty-first century, especially as touted by medical science and communications technology, promises continual geometric advancement for a humankind that has no foreseeable end. Shakespeare and Donne, whose medicines, modes of travel, and material existence in general had remained unchanged (with the exception, perhaps, of the stirrup) for two millennia, lived with the possibility that on any given Sunday the Apocalypse might unexpectedly visit decaying humanity. It helps to remember that even at the time of Donne’s death, London, still more than 200 years away from an underground sewage system, remained a crucible of disease. Unpredictable events in a Providential universe, the fallen state of man, and the nonexistence of the concept of natural health are much easier for us to understand if we were to imagine stepping in our neighbors’ filth as we left the house for the day.
Donne famously demonstrates the attitude of the time in another oft-quoted couplet from *The First Anniversary*: “There is no health; Physicians say that wee / At best, enjoy but a neutralitie” (91-92). Our modern cliché conversation with newly expectant parents would be unthinkable to Donne: Do you want to have a boy or a girl? We have no preference: we only want the baby to be healthy. For Donne and Shakespeare (and Spenser, for that matter), all infants are simply smaller post-lapsarian containers for faults and corruption. There may be hope, but certainly no expectation, that an infant survive to adulthood. That both authors survived several of their own children would have been sad but certainly not surprising. The ultimate hope might be that surviving children would grow to be penitent vehicles of sin, god-fearing faulty individuals. Harris sums up Goodman’s thesis on the overall process of decay that is man’s life:

> Man’s birth is mean and dangerous, his life is short, and his death inevitable. He is weak and helpless when he is born, sometimes dying and sometimes causing death at birth. He comes into the world head first, without weapons or defense, and knows only confusion from his first day. His brief stay on earth becomes even briefer. His body can be embalmed and thus preserved, but the days of his life are few; since the Flood these days are fewer still. (Harris 38)

Man’s corruption was not just metaphysical but physical. Donne shows that we are capable of only sickness or neutrality, not health. Mind, body, and soul are interwoven and mutually tainted, making impossible our modern assumption of a more Cartesian mind-body system that recognizes uniquely mental and uniquely physical diseases that emerge from an originally healthy body. Today, we are healthy until we catch a cold or develop a disease. Aside from genetic disorders, all sicknesses come from
without, not from within, and the sources are named, numbered, researched, analyzed, and quantified. Genetic diseases and birth defects in and around 1600, by contrast, in addition to some diseases developing later in life, were closely tied to divine punishment, astrology, material decay, and the overall moral deficiency of man (Huet 130). Man contains all disease, or contains in his flawed spirit the capacity to draw divine punishment that activates a dormant disease in the body, or metaphysically inserts it. Today, we have shifted the source of non-congenital disease wholly outside the body: from the Hantavirus to carcinogenic black walnut sawdust, from E. coli 0157:H7 to Trans fats, pathogen to allergen, we are a healthy body invaded by a foreign particle. Donne, especially in his *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*, revels in his knowledge, his certainty, that both cause and effect of his sickness are contained within his faulty and fallen body. That the same model stands for his spiritual sickness only proves his point.

Thus, our concept of medical progress is based on exponential growth in the sheer quantity of named and known external causes of disease that can be counteracted and overcome by pharmacologically produced medicines. If sickness invades the castle of the body, we send in a custom-designed chemical SWAT team to kill the intruder. Each time we create a new drug or surgical procedure, we experience progress. Vaccination, the introduction of weakened disease into the body to train the host to fight for itself, is a strong frontier in medical conquest. Vaccination and chemotherapy would have been fascinating (though not shocking) for Donne: introducing pathogens and poisons into the body to cure it, as a model of medical progress, suggests the type of metaphysical and
metaphorical conceptual play that he so thoroughly enjoyed, and that Shakespeare wrote into plays and sonnets.

Nearly 200 years before Edward Jenner’s work on vaccination, Shakespeare was using the concept of curing sickness through sickness itself or by the introduction of poisons into the body. Northumberland in 2Henry IV quips “In poison there is physic” (1.1.137) Sonnet 118 notes that “As to prevent our maladies unseen / We sicken to shun sickness when we purge,” and “brought to medicine a healthful state / Which, rank of goodness, would by ill be cured” (lines 3-4, 11-12). Sonnet 119 continues this idea of curing through poison, suggesting the involvement of an iatrochemical process: “What potions have I drunk of Siren tears / Distilled from limbecks foul as hell within, / Applying fears to hopes, and hopes to fears” (lines 1-3). And although the laboratory equipment is “foul as hell,” the result is effective: “O benefit of ill: now I find true / That better is by evil still made better” (lines 9-10). His love is not only strong and healthy, rebuilt on a new foundation, but is actually geometrically improved, allowing him to “gain by ills thrice more than I have spent” (line 14). So while corruption is inevitable, it may be ameliorated by careful and considered application of what seems to be even more deadly.

Sir Francis Bacon would certainly agree with this type of moral practical wisdom, as well as the appreciation for the potential utility for discovering (or re-discovering) what may be helpful for man’s condition. A strong believer in the concept that we learn by observing nature, and that we improve by remembering our observations and those of the past, Bacon might consider Donne as a bit of a Chicken Little: if the sky seems like it
is falling, perhaps it is because we have lost or mistranslated some wisdom of the ancients. Yet Bacon never considered the hypotheses that enabled ancients like Democritus to discover scientific truths. Bacon insisted upon close observation of nature as well as on the limits of our perceptions, but he stopped short of Descartes’s fertile method of examining not just nature itself but what we say about nature. Ironically, Bacon’s death of pneumonia was a direct result of actually “doing” science: curious to see whether snow would, like salt, act as a preservative for meat, he stuffed snow into a chicken. While a practical exercise in the study of white granules or cold temperatures on the preservation of meat, Bacon’s lack of a theory to guide his experiment further demonstrates his distance from the paradigms developed by scientists over 400 years that have informed our commonsense worldview. When reading these authors, we must be aware of the fundamental differences in how we think and speak about science.

Lest we get too smug with modern scientia, we must also recognize the potential downward trend in sapientia. Imagine the embarrassment of explaining to Shakespeare or Donne our society’s confusion over childhood obesity. We have turned food production into factory science, we measure BMI and blood chemistry, and we treat diabetes. We employ massive amounts of technology in both creating and treating an epidemic of fat kids. Where they would see the manifestation of greed or sloth naturally emerging from a naturally weak human, progress has us looking for environmental factors: chemicals in a child’s drinking water, lead from the paint on his bathroom door, or BPAs from his baby bottle caused ADHD or introduced a thyroid condition. There is
no Providence, decay, or Sin in our science: all maladies that come from outside the body and are treated from the outside of the body.

Although oversimplified, these contrasts suggest two different concepts of the body. First is the idea that the human condition is naturally decayed and fallen, an idea that leaves one prone to the unsearchable design of Providence and lacking faith in any hope of progress. The second idea is the post-Cartesian removal of Providence made room for a concept of natural health in the body. From these two concepts emerged the fundamental difference between what we expect from medical science today and what was expected of medical science 400 years ago: we expect the physician to be God, Donne expected to meet God right after meeting the physician. Modern medicine promises diagnoses of most conditions, pathology laboratories, prescriptions, and percentages for your odds of recovery. The patient of 1600 could expect something that tasted bad, opened him up at both ends, and was often likely to kill him.

Skepticism (if not downright fear) was the most appropriate response to medical treatment at the time. Spenser’s aversion to truly engaging with medical practice can be seen in the compulsive need to fly from the medical moment into the more fully comprehensible realm of allegory—a place where all of the questions are already answered. Donne and Shakespeare are highly skeptical of any type of medicine, and with good reason. What is distinctive for the two later authors regarding their uses of iatrochemistry is that they explore fairly, demonstrating both skepticism and cautious

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2 Even drinking strong vinegar, as in Shakespeare’s Sonnet 111, seems like a tame-tasting medicine in the context of this period: “Whilst like a willing patient I will drink / Potions of eisel ‘gainst my strong infection; / No bitterness that I will bitter think, / Nor double penance to correct correction” (lines 9-12).
optimism. They do not have complete faith in current medicine, so they discuss how the new versions of understanding contagion and cure might offer—if not discovery and progress—at least a potential practical utility. Medical professionals sometimes admitted to the “inadequacy of the Galenic theories” for daily use in their practice (Fletcher 5). The new theories and vocabularies of disease are not simply dismissed as new ways of being killed by your doctor. And even though they do not wholeheartedly adopt iatrochemistry, they let it play in the yard. Ultimately, this demonstrates a sense of respect for human experience and for man’s ability to more fully comprehend his complex existence.

Iatrochemistry, developing out of chemical experimentation and metaphysical exploration of alchemy, offers rich visual imagery, new mechanisms for metaphor, and opens discussion for the human body’s relationship to disease as a dynamic process, rather than a self-contained product. Newfound (or rediscovered) respect for wise female healers in the Paracelsian literature might prove influential for the role of Helena in All’s Well That Ends Well—a possibility that will be explored in chapter 2 of this dissertation. The female healer on stage is quite groundbreaking—especially considering that her one and only patient is the King. Her couplet at the end of scene 1 cements her purpose and role as physician: “The king’s disease—my project may deceive me, / But my intents are fixed and will not leave me” (1.1.228-29). This relationship is perhaps itself a product of the iatrochemical discussion taking place in England, and is a bright contrast to Breton’s version of the worthy physician. Read in a modern context, Breton’s pronouns sound like a gendered tickle factory in their production of the masculine he, he, he, he, he.
It will be suggested in chapter 3 of this dissertation that Shakespeare’s works move from strictly Galenic, traditional, and humoral in their discussion of the human body—particularly in *King John* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*—to a body that increasingly includes and allows for iatrochemical understanding. The watershed moment seems to be Helena in *All’s Well That Ends Well*, moving forward into the implied interpersonal particulate contamination in *Timon of Athens*, to alchemical resonances in the fairy song of *The Tempest*, and the unique cross-contamination of Ficinian astrology with healing in *Pericles*.

While John Donne does not mirror Shakespeare’s steady move away from a strictly Galenic body, he often playfully demonstrates a thoughtful awareness of the ways in which medicine is attempting to benefit from alchemical pursuits. Sometimes he mocks, and sometimes he uses images and processes as metaphorical means to a different end. While it is difficult to find anything (outside of his Christian faith) that Donne will truly claim to believe in, he strongly disbelieves that any physician has the ability to affect or to perform an act of healing on the physical shell of spiritually diseased man. However, metaphysical explorations of both the soul and the body benefit from Donne’s understanding of the newer natural philosophy as it applies to astronomy as well as anatomy. Donne would not see himself as an innovator or maker of great discoveries, but he certainly seems to appreciate man’s ability to gain further understanding of himself through introspection. He is not an optimist, but he is also not a full-blown Augustinian like Goodman.
Even though our belief in scientific progress is not unique to our time and place, Americans of the twenty-first century are largely material optimists in monitoring our well-being. In economics as in medicine, we assign value rather than destruction to the passage of time: things are improving, there is progress. If things are not improving, we can blame policies or politicians for getting in the way—if they were not building obstacles, our dynamic and irresistible optimism/progress machine would keep rolling into the future. Public Radio feverishly inundates its audience with financial market updates, monthly job numbers (followed by days and days of commentary), housing starts, hourly market updates, changes to any consumer index or spending trend, gratifying our insatiable appetite for proof of quantifiable progress. People phone in to discuss any number that indicates the U.S. economy is not moving in the right direction. We expect progress and we worry when we do not see it constantly.

While we cannot claim that those authors who choose to engage with the newer medical concepts actually have any expectation for meaningful change, we can understand that the authors find in these debates mechanisms and processes that can augment the limited science of medieval Galenic humoralism. Their enthusiasm for *knowing*, and their willingness to develop extended discussions of what we might hope to know, engage their readers and draw us in—even if they do not arrive at the ultimate truth. It is too depressing to attribute to these authors a blanket theory of futility and hopelessness. Perhaps through exploring iatrochemical theories and images, in thinking through the significance of methodically exploring and cataloguing the human body
through anatomies, the authors are demonstrating, if not optimism, at least an appreciation for potential utility.

J.B. Bury discusses the development in the perceived value of knowledge which allows for the concepts of mankind’s cumulative progress and utility. He reminds us of Seneca’s position that the value of knowledge lies in the way it allows the intelligent man to escape the “sordid miseries of life” (Bury 51). Roger Bacon introduced a valuation of knowledge that was goal-oriented, in that it could help man prepare for the imminent Apocalypse. Francis Bacon moves knowledge out of the solipsistic, escapist Senecan mental pain cave and beyond the apocalyptic vision of Roger Bacon, suggesting utility as the ultimate value of man’s knowledge. This insistence upon the usefulness of knowledge is reflected by Francis Bacon’s lifelong concern for advancing his own utility, and therefore value, at court. Of course, we cannot assume that the latter Bacon’s attitude is therefore modern, as “we must remember that for Bacon, as by most of his Elizabethan contemporaries, the doctrine of Providence, the Providence of Augustine, was taken as matter of course, and governed more or less their conceptions of the history of civilization” (Bury 59). Man still wasn’t entirely in control of his own destiny, but at least he could use his knowledge to collaborate with and for others (not just work alone), striving toward some type of communal improvement of material conditions.

In exploring Burton’s pansophic hypertextuality and Bacon’s material optimism in Chapter Six, we will see how two great nonliterary imaginations of the period wrestle with the emergence of newer medical theories. The librarian and the statesman help to flesh out the playwright and the poet/cleric, grounding the poetic exploration of medicine
not in science qua science, but at least in a more physical realm of application. This change in attitude was noted in 1926 by John Herman Randall, in his discussion of Galileo’s perception relating man’s pursuit of knowledge to the role Providence: “We may not presume to know the ends of the Almighty; it is enough for us to investigate the precise way in which they are accomplished, and utilize our knowledge to bend events to our own human purposes” (Randall 239). Not until Descartes, or rather the ascendancy of his ideas as Cartesianism, can we fully discard this problem of Providence—although our authors’ investigations into the workings of Creation already suggest that the problem may not be insurmountable.

It might be worthwhile to imagine, briefly, what kind of writing we could expect from a post-Cartesian Donne or Shakespeare, as “Cartesianism affirmed the two positive axioms of the supremacy of reason, and the invariability of the laws of nature” (Bury 65). Bury defines the Cartesian mental shift dramatically: “The supremacy of reason shook the thrones from which authority and tradition had tyrannized over the brains of men” (Bury 65). While it is difficult to disagree with Bury, it is also difficult to say that Donne or Shakespeare were cerebrally oppressed by Providence. They were limited, certainly, but in ways that help define their purpose. Malebranche’s work explores the incompatibility of Cartesianism’s immutable laws of nature with Providence: “The world had begun to abandon the theory of corruption, degeneration, and decay” (Bury 76). As an intellectual exercise, we can imagine that Donne’s most engaging work would have been impossible 100 years later.
Donne requires corruption, degeneration, and decay. Man’s insuperable dualism provides the fuel for much of Donne’s best work. The “unhappy union” of body and soul results in such negative moods and experiences as vulnerability, confusion, grief, sorrow, and death. “Many of these ills are directly attributable to the conflict in man between the body and the spirit—the combination in one entity of the corruptible and the incorruptible, the sensible and the intelligent, the material and the spiritual” (Harris 40). Donne’s need to constantly attempt to leave the body—his drive toward ecstasy—is born out of the frustrated yoking of a weak body to a corrupted soul.

Man’s tense relationship with his diseased body is still explored in today’s popular culture. Modern medical dramas tend to place the blame on the patient for engaging in dangerous behavior or ignoring obvious symptoms (Foss 1-2). Even though 400 years have passed, and the medium has shifted from serious medical writing to pure entertainment, the onus of individual responsibility endures from the earliest syphilography of Ulrich von Hutten to the cheesy surgical television drama Grey’s Anatomy: disease will exist in the world, and it is the duty of the individual to avoid reckless and immoral behavior, and to be honest and early in reporting symptoms to the physician. The difference today is that Providence is nowhere in the discussion.

Our theories and convictions about emergent epidemiologies (concerning obesity, COPD, diabetes, inter al.) are nothing compared with three centuries of certainty about the divine origins of plague, or even with the immoral judgmental causations rife in the syphilography of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. We now know, what was still being discovered and debated in the sixteenth and seventeenth century syphilography,
that disease is not static. Although we expect and experience constant progress in knowledge and cures, there seems to be no upper limit for emergence of new threats to bodily—and by extension, public (social and political) health. “We might well have anticipated living in a post-disease era, were it not for the arrival of new viruses, such as HIV/AIDS, and a resurgence of old diseases like malaria and tuberculosis” (Madden 137). We must be aware that our progress is not perfect. We are not in a position to patronize medical thought of the seventeenth century. Even advancements as technical as The Human Genome Project (HGP), while scientifically groundbreaking, have yet to adequately unravel the complex experience of the human condition. The HGP is something Bacon would praise but not fully understand. Donne would gleefully find it an inadequate measure of man (although he would revel in the double-helical shape of DNA). Shakespeare would demonstrate how very little it truly shows us about the complex thoughts and behaviors of the individual. “Paying attention to the way ideas of disease are transmitted makes it possible to see medicine as a complex form of language activity between ‘communities of disputants, authors, and respondents’” (Madden 148).3

In exploring these acts of language, we are recovering some part of the political dimension of the history of ideas.

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3 The latter part of Madden’s quotation comes from Quentin Skinner quoted in Richard Macksey, “Introduction: Texts, Contexts, and the Rules of the Games,” *MLN* 96:5 (1981) vi. The provenance of this quotation demonstrates the layered dialogue—a delayed community meeting over decades—that occurs also in the writing about writing about writing about writing *about* people who write, dispute, and respond.
Chapter Two:

Doctor She: Alchemical, Paracelsian, Divine, and Sexual Healing

in All’s Well That Ends Well

In 1610 London, astrologer and medical practitioner Simon Forman attended a performance of Macbeth and suggested in his diary that he did “observe howe Mackbets quen did rise in the night in her slepe, & walked and talked and confessed all & the doctor noted her words” (Kassell 162). Elizabeth Kassell, author of a monograph on Forman, responds to this line with the clear but brief observation that “Doctors discovered the secrets of women.” While the revelation of women’s secrets provides a cursory interpretation of Lady Macbeth’s diagnosis in the play, perhaps most fascinating about Forman’s diary entry is that a practicing medical professional demonstrates engagement with the portrayal of a doctor in popular theatrical production. Physicians knew Shakespeare, recognized physicians within the plays, and then in turn wrote about the experience.

What does it matter that a physician attended theatre? Forman’s diary entry shows a professional interest in the specific details of Lady Macbeth’s sleep behavior and the mental burden of knowledge of crime; just as a cobbler or joiner attending a performance might take special interest in the materials of the players’ footwear or a support beam for the stage canopy. The obvious difference is that there is a doctor portrayed on stage, written into the play, providing insights and interpretations unique to that profession. The late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries saw an explosion of
physicians portrayed in literary contexts, along with a flood of technical language exploring concepts of disease, contagion, and cure. Ways and words of conceptualizing disease in literature of the period directly mirrored changes in medical science itself. The period’s fascination with potential medical applications of alchemy shifted thought for medical and literary imaginations alike. While physicians focused on the more or less “scientific” merits of new medicines, poets translated the concepts into literal or metaphorical capsules for a larger vernacular public.

This begins to sound like modern television programming, and indeed there are at least three major functions that have remained unchanged in the dramatic representation of medicine from *All’s Well That Ends Well* (ca.1601-4) up through modern television medico-dramas. The first function is voyeurism: the danger and pain of sickness (and how the healthy react to others experiencing these) is fascinating to observe in a dramatic context. The second function is an immediate and accessible stage for exploring death, faith, suffering, and overall purpose of life—the big topics. The third function is the vernacular demonstration of state-of-the-art medical theories and technologies.

In *All’s Well That Ends Well*, the diseased King of France has been given up for dead by the medical experts, “Both of Galen and Paracelsus” (2.3.11). In this simple phrase delivered by the braggart Parolles, Shakespeare names the major medical debate at the beginning of the seventeenth century: the traditional medical theory of second-century Galen which was still taught heavily in Continental and English universities, versus the newer iconoclastic theories of the Swiss-German itinerant physician and alchemist Philippus Aureolus Theophrastus Bombast von Hohenheim, also known as
Paracelsus (1493-1541). Scholarship of the past nine decades has tacitly agreed that immediately after dropping this weighty name on the reader, there should be some brief categorization of the bizarre Paracelsus himself, followed by one of the legendary anecdotes of the man’s chronic disregard for authority. His biographies offer graphic if not disturbing episodes, including speculation on whether Paracelsus was castrated by a boar at age three or by a soldier at age nine. Another brand of legend hints at hermaphroditism. Fascination with his physical sexuality often proves a shortcut to understanding the overall perception of Paracelsus as a crude and rusticated genius or charlatan, whose personal character is largely unattractive. This perception is built on a foundation of his strong personality and wild iconoclasm, which can make Paracelsus’s medical and alchemical theories hard to stomach: the character often gets in the way of the sound medical and alchemical ideas.

The character of Paracelsus in English literature is sometimes separated from and sometimes mixed with Paracelsian theories. Paracelsus’s signature theory of three elements—that all matter is composed of the primary ingredients of salt, sulfur, and mercury combined in various relative quantities at various temperatures—is adapted by various authors as their model for exploring the man himself. The three principles become evident when heat is applied and causes matter to break down. Famously illustrative of the concept is Paracelsus’s exercise for reducing a twig to salt, mercury,

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4 Charles Webster’s recent book-length study on Paracelsus shows in great detail that the man was known to contemporaries initially as Theophrastus von Hohenheim, a label which developed through a process described by Webster in modern marketing terminology as a “rebranding” for publishing purposes, to the name Paracelsus (15-16 and 39-43). Since the purpose of this study is to focus on the man’s influences half a century or more after his death, the name Paracelsus is appropriate throughout.
and sulfur. When flame is applied, smoke is released, representing mercury. The ember
denotes sulfur, and the ash, salt. I say “representing” and “denotes” because for
Paracelsus, the three basic building blocks as we see them are still merely crude
representations of the abstract purity that is the true principle. Using this model, we will
treat “Paracelsus,” with all the attendant baggage, as a compound legend, and, applying
the heat of inquiry, attempt to separate its three principles of the character, the occultist,
and the iatrochemist (chemical physician). Thus, for purposes of this study, “current
medical thought” will include those troubled areas under examination: cause of disease,
type of damage caused by the disease, and the mechanism for cure. Ultimately, this study
hopes to illuminate the ways in which certain major authors engaged with ideas from
current medical debates and vernacular treatises for various purposes: continuing the
scientific dialogue, expanding the fields of poetic idiom, or commenting on perennial
topics of private and public relationships.

Today, in the popular, technology-driven versions of Western medicine, we insist
on separating spiritual from bodily health to a degree that would be alien to these authors.
Spenser and Shakespeare never could have divorced spiritual from material medicine.
Psychic and physical contagion were explored nonexclusively, lending imagination and
spiritual influence actual power over material health and mechanisms of contagion
(Healy 42-43). The state-of-the-art technologies, then, for our early seventeenth-century
authors, consist largely in conceptual approaches to contagion and cure, supported by
emerging iatrochemistry developing under the unofficial franchise of Paracelsianism.
Rather than attempting a thorough introductory explanation of the complex and contested
details of Paracelsian medicine, I shall let these concepts emerge below as they relate to specific elements of the literature.

Shakespeare’s sole direct reference to Paracelsus is not merely topical, and the coupling to Galen is no accident. Medical authorities in the late sixteenth century and well into the seventeenth century hotly contested the two schools of thought. John Jones’s 1574 treatise *Galen’s Bookes of Elements* gives perhaps the first printed example of the debate, wherein the title page proclaims the text “[confutes] the errours of the Paracelsians,” even if, as Allen Debus points out, the text does not actually make good on the promise to engage the debate (Debus 75). Sheldon P. Zitner writes that the reference to Galen and Paracelsus in *All’s Well That Ends Well* suggests “Shakespeare’s awareness of the controversy” (140). This study will demonstrate that Shakespeare and other major authors of the period are not merely aware of the controversy, but actively use the dynamic developments in medical literature to complicate and illuminate creative literature.

A simplified understanding of Galenic medicine holds that disease originates internally as a humoral imbalance within the closed system that is the body: to cure a disease, the physician must counteract the imbalance by applying organic matter restoring the humoral balance. The composition of the Galenic body had not altered since classical times and all manifestations of sickness demonstrated the body reacting predictably to some quality of the environment on an earth that had not changed since its creation. The radically different Paracelsian viewpoint holds that disease is an autonomous entity. It comes from the outside and invades the body—disease itself is separate from, not
dependent upon, the human body: seeds of disease can take root in the body. Andrew Weeks, translator of a large recent collection of Paracelsus’s writings, suggests in his introduction to Paracelsus’s *Paramirum* that the text marks the “understanding of disease as a process. This supports the intended shift from a medicine of elemental humors or quantitative degrees to a new medicine based on organic individuals and transformations effected by arcane powers” (17). Paracelsus allows for astral and planetary influences on the body—which arcane categories, invoked also by Galenists, we shall largely overlook. He also works a cure through the application of unities by chemically altering, not simply rebalancing, the humoral regimen. The specific chemical medicines vary by locality, as one cannot expect bodies or contagions to interact in northern Europe the same way they would in the Mediterranean; or in the year 1530 the same as in 200. Diseases should be cured “by a unitary rather than a dualistic method” (Debus *English Paracelsians* 60). Disease does not merely vanish when the humors have been rebalanced: each specific, physically localized disease within the body has its specific cure (Sloan 45, Pagel 145). The goal of the physician is to cause the death of the disease. Perhaps most importantly, Paracelsus allows for the possibility of new diseases—sources of sickness that are novel forms or new entities, a potentially disruptive challenge to the understanding of the world as unchanged and immutable since the Creation—quite possibly a heresy that prompts Donne to place Paracelsus in Hell as an “Innovator” in *Ignatius His Conclave* (to be discussed later). This rough sketch of their mechanical models may serve to demonstrate the central point of contention between the two schools.
In his *Volumen Paramirum*, Paracelsus “warned his reader not to fall into depending on books produced by the *Tantalorum*,” a group of classical and canonical medical writers “appropriately headed by Galen” (Webster *Paracelsus* 113). The quasi-demonization of canonical medical authors was not just a publicity stunt. Paracelsus had great respect for changes befalling European pathology in the sixteenth-century. New diseases, such as syphilis, were developing in what was previously thought to be a medically familiar world. New diseases required new treatments and new understanding of the mechanisms of contagion: Paracelsus had respect for heterogeneous nature, in which “substances as well as diseases are subject to change” (Weeks “Introduction” 25). The greatest hazard of treating sixteenth-century German ailments with classical Greek and Arabic cures lay in the blatant disregard of drastic changes in time and place: “Among the adverse effects were new environmental threats and entirely new diseases, requiring new names, new modes of explanation and new forms of treatment. It was obviously absurd to expect that medical writings originating a thousand years earlier would be remotely suitable to meet the needs of such a dangerous situation” (Webster *Paracelsus* 117). Thus, the largely conservative and unchanging Galenic understanding of the body came under fire for not allowing for the possibility of any new disease: “Aristotle came to embody for Paracelsus the blind refusal to recognize the obvious diversity and mutability of substances” (Weeks “Introduction” 25). Such openness and insistence upon change and upon the physician’s need to adjust medicine to follow caused such a stir in medical publication that, by the end of the century, most Elizabethans had to acknowledge it.
Although there are several areas on which the Galenists and Paracelsians can agree, the debate’s fundamental tension arises from the (partly perceived, partly actual) iconoclasm of the newer school. Paracelsus believes that historically, medicine has not always been corrupt, and in his highly opinionated treatise “Diseases That Deprive Man of Reason,” spends his wrath against contemporary physicians and the damage they have caused:

> The two arts, medicine and alchemy, have again and again emulated each other and crossed each other’s path until the driveling sophists and humoralists appeared. At that time poison was poured into medicine and medicine became the whore she will be so long as there are humoralists. (192)

In effect, he has implicitly presented the humoralist school and its practitioners themselves to be a disease, or at least guilty of administering poison. The personification of medicine-as-whore adds a richness and drama that is uniquely Paracelsian. He concludes a particularly clear and vitriolic passage by arguing that “the humoralists and quacks cure no one and their occupation and actions are nothing but humbug” (192). Constant attacks on his colleagues and their adherence to a stagnant and largely obsolete medical canon is well illustrated by the legendary anecdote of Paracelsus being run out of Basel for throwing the works of Avicenna onto a bonfire: he held the veneration of centuries-dead authority to be the source of medicine’s intellectual stalemate. Weeks argues that “the material sources documented [in Weeks’ new translation] indicate that most of his healing herbs and stones were traditional remedies

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5 While Galen is not remembered as an iconoclast, his *Method of Medicine* repeatedly demonstrates dissatisfaction with established practices: Galen is staunchly of the Empirical approach and derides those of the Rationalist persuasion.
found for the most part in Pliny, Dioscorides, and medieval medicine” ("Introduction" 37). Thus the newer medicine does not require an entire reinvention of materia medica, but a shift in understanding transmission of disease, and application and efficacy of cure.

Since Paracelsus is often celebrated or dismissed as an alchemist, it is most important to distinguish iatrochemistry from the concepts of alchemy—which, as seen in Stanton Linden’s thorough readings of English literature of the period, seemed to undergo several conceptual shifts regarding published opinion and uses of the art. For the purposes of the current study, iatrochemistry will denote concepts arising from the developing notion of chemical medicine—mostly, as such, born of alchemical theories of natural philosophy—in the latter half of the sixteenth century. The materia is largely inorganic (metallic) rather than organic (herbal), though Paracelsus allowed many traditional herbs and promoted a doctrine of signatures, wherein the similarity in shape of certain plants and certain organs was not seen as mere coincidence. Iatrochemical concepts had perhaps their most fervent and colorful mouthpiece in Paracelsus.

Although Paracelsus had been dead at least 60 years by the time All’s Well That Ends Well was composed around 1601, the medical debates were at their height. Allen Debus’s study of Paracelsian influence and reception, The English Paracelsians, carefully delineates how much and in what ways the Swiss-German’s theories were accepted, rejected, utilized, or railed against over the decades as publications concerning the newer medicine surged. The significance of medical and alchemical writings is not limited to their respective fields: the debates, imagery, and conceptualizations of how the body acquires, reacts to, and overcomes disease make meaningful appearances in the
drama, poetry, and other literature of the period. Elizabeth Spiller’s recent study *Science, Reading, and Renaissance Literature: The Art of Making Knowledge* demonstrates that European authors are not merely reporting scientific or medical developments, but drawing from these increasingly empiric fields to create new knowledge and adapting these concepts to poetic ends.

To what poetic purpose, then, does Shakespeare engage the medical debate? What would Shakespeare’s audience have known about Galen and Paracelsus or about the debate? Did Shakespeare know that, in addition to his medical and alchemical expertise, Paracelsus held strong opinions on nearly every subject, including witchcraft, methods of travel, and the marriage habits of water nymphs? Is the reference to the schools “Both of Galen and Paracelsus” pedantic or speaking over the heads of his groundlings? The previously mentioned Galenic treatise by John Jones shows that in the 1570s, the debate was alive not just in Latinate publication, but in the English vernacular.

Thomas Dekker, a highly accessible and endlessly entertaining voice from the beginning of the seventeenth century, engages the debate to offer what can be taken as the definition of a broad understanding of contemporary medical knowledge. Dekker’s *The Seven Deadly Sinnes of London* (1606), is a scathing and detailed character sketch of the city itself with the quotidian behaviors of its inhabitants. In the seventh chapter, showing the most deadly sin of cruelty, Dekker asks “What Gallenist or Paracelsian in the world, by all his water-casting, and minerall extractions, would judge, that this fairest-fac’d daughter of *Brute* (and good daughter to King Lud, who gave her her name) should have so much corruption in her body?” (55) While Dekker certainly seems to be
demeaning both schools with his flippant categorization as urine-gazers and stone-boilers, he combines Galen and Paracelsus nonetheless to represent the entire spectrum of medical potential. At the same time, Dekker implies that neither medical rival is equipped to truly diagnose a terminal condition: the depth and quantity of cruelty present in the feminized body of London is beyond the help of medicine.

Ben Jonson’s *The Alchemist* (1610), in addition to famously satirizing exoteric alchemy, reinforces the presence of the medical debate in London. Sir Epicure Mammon defends Face to Surly, placing Face on the side of Paracelsus:

No, he’s a rare physician, do him right,  
An excellent Paracelsian, and has done  
Strange cures with mineral physic. He deals all  
With spirits, he; he will not hear a word  
Of Galen; or his tedious recipes. (2.3.233-37)

This speech demonstrates familiarity with the names as well as the techniques generally understood to be part of the debate. Paracelsus is paired with iatrochemistry as well as the more dangerous spiritual approach to healing, whereas Galen is associated with instructions for compounding humoral pharmacy.

In another example from 1618, the engraving of Johann Daniel Mylius at the beginning of his *Opus medico-chymicum* is captioned “Reader, wilt thou have the mirror of Paracelsus and Galen? Behold, Mylius is certainly the mirror of both to thee” (de Rola 150 n.116). On the left side of the author’s portrait is an alchemical laboratory, featuring a grinning Paracelsus wielding tongs and an alembic near a fire. On the right side is a
library, wherein Galen holds a book. It would seem that the overall message is that Mylius is the combination of the best of both schools of thought: Paracelsian laboratory and Galenic tradition. This unique choice suggests another position in the debate—one of compromise—but does nothing to explain why Mylius is holding a pair of gloves.

Is it possible that, by 1600, both medical authorities were being combined as a way of harmonizing them after decades of supposed opposition? Shakespeare, always at pains to clarify his learned allusions, rarely succumbs to pedantry. Does Shakespeare make fun of the medical practitioners’ mystification? Or is he taking the iatrochemical issue seriously? An attempt to answer these questions requires close reading of how Paracelsus is used in *All’s Well That Ends Well*. Is it merely topical, pedantic name-dropping? Or can we discuss a more complete package demonstrating true engagement with the medical debate?

In contrast to the more thoroughgoing studies of Shakespeare’s alchemical references, Paracelsian readings of Shakespeare range from slight to skeptical. While it would be unfair and ludicrous to attempt a Paracelsian reading (the concept we will attempt to clarify below) of each of the plays, it would be equally dangerous to dismiss the likelihood that Paracelsus colors the playwright’s medical thinking. In his illuminating 1992 study *Medicine and Shakespeare in the English Renaissance*, David Hoeniger asserts that apart from the direct reference to Galen and Paracelsus in *All’s Well That Ends Well*, “echoes in Shakespeare to anything specifically Paracelsian are debatable, and only a few passages deserve consideration” (124). Certainly Hoeniger is taking care not to claim explicit influence on the plays: “specifically Paracelsian”
presumably means direct reference to the man himself or at least remotely recognizable quotations from his works. As the argument is stated, we must question not Hoeniger’s expertise in the field, but rather his use of “echoes.” Echoes, sounding from one text, bouncing off another in the distance, and returning in an altered, muted form provide one possible model for reexamining Shakespeare’s works. When we hear the plays today, with the benefit of previous scholarship to offset the hindrance of distance, we can fairly argue that what comes back sounds, at times, as though Paracelsian thought did indeed provide Shakespeare with novel ways of perceiving the human body and disease.

For what may be possible echoes of Paracelsus, Hoeniger suggests *The Rape of Lucrece* (lines 530-32) and *Macbeth* 2.3.108-13, as these passages carry potentially alchemical keywords; images of gold and changing colors reminiscent of the *cauda pavonis*: the peacock’s tail, a stage of exoteric alchemy in which the alembic exhibits an array of colors. It could be argued that the two above passages at best allude only tenuously to alchemy. Tarquin alludes to the “poisonous simple” that becomes benign when mixed in a compound. These lines are entirely herbal, describing a toxic substance rendered neutral but not turned into medicine. The reference to gold or a succession of color changes of Duncan’s “silver skin laced with his golden blood” does not merit a deep reading or redefinition of a passage in purely alchemical terms. Sonnet 33 directly invokes alchemy when the morning is “Gilding pale streams with heavenly alchemy” (line 4), an image in which, as Stanton Linden argues, “this vision of natural beauty is soon to be obscured” by the “basest clouds” (*Darke* 93). Thus the art is used metaphorically, and is not in itself the subject of the sonnet but rather a means of
demonstrating how “the speaker’s moment of bliss is lost through the cruelty of his friend” (Darke 93). Again alchemy makes an appearance in sonnet 114 where it “is used as a metaphor for change” (Darke 93), and not necessarily for overtly discussing the merits, faults, methods, practitioners, or detractors of the art. In King John, King Philip uses the traditional alchemical metaphor of the gilding sun:

To solemnize this day the glorious sun
    Stays in his course and plays the alchymist,
    Turning with splendor of his precious eye
    The meager cloddy earth to glittering gold. (3.1.77-80)

That there is anything specifically Paracelsian in this passage is highly doubtful: while Shakespeare is superficially using the alchemical metaphor of the sun/gold image, he does not engage the alchemical process with its climactic projection. The basic mechanics and imagery of exoteric alchemy become so generic as to border on cliché in any creative work seeking a quick visual metaphor for physical enhancement. In discussion of these alchemical references (in addition to those found in Julius Caesar, Timon of Athens, 2 Henry IV, and Antony and Cleopatra), Linden argues that “alchemical allusions are short and easily separated from the larger work. . . they perform no vital role in motivating the action of a play, in promoting characterization, or in establishing a significant pattern of imagery” (Darke 101). It could be argued, however feebly, that the King John passage suggests a deeper engagement, as the “meager cloddy earth” has a three-dimensionality that implies transmutation through the clumps of earth rather than a superficial gilding. Regardless, it cannot be presented as specifically Paracelsian.
Ariel’s song in *The Tempest* has been read as illustrative of alchemical processes, moving beyond the simple image of the sun as an alchemist, gilding the ground with its rays. The song demonstrates transmutation from one material into another, richer one:

> Full fathom five thy father lies,
> Of his bones are coral made;
> Those are pearls that were his eyes;
> Nothing of him that doth fade,
> But doth suffer a sea-change
> Into something rich and strange.
>
> Sea nymphs hourly ring his knell. (1.2.397-403)

The physical transmutation in Ariel’s song is one from base matter to something precious: not from lead into gold, but from bone to coral, from eyes to pearls. The corpse of Alonso, King of Naples, is the physical matter that is being alchemically transmuted in Ariel’s song, which is entirely consistent with the alchemical tradition of referring to the contents of the alembic as a king. It may be important to note, however, that the whole song is based upon deception: Alonso is not dead or undergoing any type of decay or other change, but is alive and well. The esoteric side of the alchemical endeavor is suggested by the modifier “strange,” which is mysterious and nonsuperficial. Even the physical structure of the song (seven lines, each containing seven syllables) reflects the significance of numerology for the art.

Without considering whether these possibly alchemical references are Paracelsian rather than alchemical, Hoeniger concludes that “evidence for Paracelsian allusions in Shakespeare is thus scanty” (127). But limiting the potential for Paracelsian echoes to
moments of metaphorical, physical alchemy loses the richer intellectual project: the ways in which Shakespeare’s medical language engages and responds to the medical debate near the turn of the century. In contrast with the alchemical references, we will see that medical terminology does in fact work toward creating a pattern of imagery not only within individual plays, but across Shakespeare’s dramatic career. Whereas alchemy is most often a metaphorical vehicle, medical imagery often engages directly with actual disease in motivating action of the play.

To better define the Paracelsian project, we should explore the ways in which Helena’s healing of the King patently differs from a Galenic rebalancing of the humoral system. We are told that the doctors of Paracelsus have failed, but the play demonstrates successful healing through a Paracelsian concept: iatrochemical treatment of like curing like.6 The King himself tells us that the Galenists and Paracelsians have not cured him with their two-sided efforts, but rather “worn me out / With several applications. Nature and sickness / Debate it at their leisure” (1.2.73-75). We will see that Helena’s medicine is alchemical in nature—thus characterized not only by textual imagery, but also by detailing the process: secrecy, a knowledge of arcane texts, and the relationship of female to male; she-doctor to king. Helena’s alchemical cure helps us better to understand the ontological and pathological distinctions of alchemical, iatrochemical (Paracelsian), and Galenic thought. The latter two categories will be explored at length below in the context

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6 Alexander Leggat, editor of the New Cambridge edition of the text, says inexplicably and straightforwardly that Helena, hearing of the King’s fistula, “takes this as an excuse to visit Paris, with a herbal cure devised by her father” (1). My examination of the alchemical and Paracelsian natures of her medicine will show that Helena’s physic is anything but herbal.
of their appearance and use, illuminating not only how the debate played out in the English literary imagination near the turn of the seventeenth century, but also the discussion and practice of medical theory is reflected in works by major writers. Todd H.J. Pettigrew suggests that Shakespeare’s play is one of several to directly question the medical establishment (30), and that *All’s Well* specifically and deliberately enters the contemporary debate over women’s involvement with medical practice (40). The medical language and imagery go beyond mere metaphor, and begin to step off the stage into the real world of early seventeenth-century medical practice.

Also at stake is the ultimate courtly concern: the King’s life. The play becomes so much more complex when we realize that the life of the King is dependent not even on a professional physician, but rather a physician’s child; and not just a child, but a daughter. We must consider, then, how the issue of access to the King is changed in a state of emergency, when the court must accept a social outsider or suffer their King’s death. The fact that Helena gains audience with the King is perhaps just as important as the outcome of her cure—and it is only because of her successful cure that she is awarded Bertram in marriage and the rest of the play becomes possible. Her cure leads to Bertram’s fit of disdainful superiority, his flight from her, her pursuit of him; and it enables her to put into action the bed-trick that ultimately provides for a final scene making good the play’s title.

But before there can be a cure, there must be a sickness. The King’s particular ailment is described as “a fistula.” Richard A. Levin suggests that although “a fistula was not specific to the anus, the *fistula in ano* was common in an age of long horse rides in
cold and wet weather” (Levin 75, also referencing Hoeniger 295). The significance of the fistula does not lie in its location, but in the fact that it is externally visible: although certainly a manifestation that has a painful physical root in the body, the fistula is not contained within the humoral body—it is not located specifically in an imbalanced organ or caused by humoral imbalance. As a chronic and often eventually fatal condition, fistula would certainly have brought gravitas to the stage: “I would it were not notorious,” says Lafew of the King’s disease (1.1.36). The fourteenth-century English surgeon John of Arderne had a simple surgical technique for treatment of anal fistula: to cut it open and control the bleeding (Sloan 105). Arderne’s work circulated only in a relatively few manuscripts, and its text combining Latin, Anglo-Saxon, and English never made it into print in the period (Gardham). Nonetheless, if Shakespeare wanted to present a malady and a cure, it takes very little imagination to arrive at Arderne’s method. It takes ample imagination to believe that Shakespeare would write a scene showing the lancing of the King’s anal fistula.

We do not see the specific action, contagion, or conditions that cause the fistula in *All’s Well*, or see it in its earlier stages. Marjorie Garber would suggest that this is “most likely because Shakespeare is not particularly interested in physical ailments of a literal kind,” a position difficult to defend in context of the first two acts of *All’s Well* (104). Richard Stensgaard presents a more convincing appreciation of the nature of the King’s fistula, suggesting that Shakespeare “was drawing on the notoriety then attached to plague-like diseases” (175). With the most recent outbreak of the plague in London all too fresh in the minds of the audience, the introduction of a swollen abscess on stage
would ring true as a mortal threat—especially when it is named in the play’s thirty-first line.

The opening scene presents the first discussion of the King’s condition. The countess recalls the healing skills of Helena’s late father, Gerard de Narbon, opining that if Gerard were still alive to apply himself to the King’s ailment, “I think it would be the death of the King’s disease” (1.1.22-23). There is a King, and there is a disease: a disease, capable of dying itself, is separate from the King. Paracelsus’ early treatise “On the Miners’ Sickness”7 is categorical on this score: “Know then, that the disease is an element and not a quality and complexion” (Four Treatises 100). It is significant that the countess does not express this thought in language such as “I think the King would be healed” or “would be made whole,” as this type of sentiment places emphasis on the physician making the King right again—or complete. The very concept of the death of disease is perhaps the most Paracelsian concept in the play, and in her promise, Helena correctly identifies and personifies the disease: “What is infirm from your sound parts shall fly, / Health shall live free, and sickness freely die” (2.1.167-68). The richness of this rhyming couplet merits attention. If we focus on order of the terms related to health—infirm, sound, health, sickness—we see that the desired conditions are imprisoned within the sick body: infirm and sickness are the outer shell containing sound and health. To the morbific terms are applied the strong verbs at the end of the two lines forming the rhyme: fly and die. This reinforces our characterizing as Paracelsian

7 “The first treatise on occupational medicine” (Sloan 45).
Helena’s conceptualization of the illness: the infirm element will actively separate itself from the King’s sound parts before perishing.

This couplet also demonstrates the movement from diagnosis to method of cure. The medical words of the first line are adjectives, infirm and sound, demonstrating diagnosis through inventory and categorization of the two types of elements at work in the King’s body. Shifting to health and sickness—both nouns—in the second line shows the healer moving from description to physical action: rather than defining the qualities of things involved, engaging the physical aspect of the cure.

Helena presents the ailment as a body separate from the King’s body—a Paracelsian ens that can “freely die” but also suggests the alchemical purification of matter—separating the impure from the pure. Helena’s couplet is nothing if not a clear depiction of the most basic spagyric image: a Paracelsian prognosis. Paracelsus uses the chemical example of perfecting copper through application of vitriol in his “Diseases That Deprive Man of Reason,” to demonstrate that advancing material toward perfection by removing the impure is a goal of the twin disciplines of alchemy and medicine (189). The sick king is a standard alchemical metaphor, represented pictorially in the works of Michael Maier and other publishers of spagyric treatises. Such material purification is not applied to just any body, but to the body that is already exalted and nearest God: to use the image of a diseased peasant would not be compelling, as a materially perfected and cured rutabaga digger is still a rutabaga digger. “Shakespeare’s allusions to alchemy all bear upon the sick king” (Haley 64). In The Tempest, the subject of Ariel’s song (often understood to be alchemical in nature) is Ferdinand’s father Alonso, the King of Naples.
Ariel sings of the transformation of the king’s flesh into coral and valuable gems. The king is understood to be more capable of ultimate perfection, and his innate merit is always recognizable. Even in the film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, King Arthur is recognized by the filthy serfs because he hasn’t got shit all over him.

Well before encountering the King in the above passage, Helena herself begins to base her knowledge on alchemy. Crucial to understanding the alchemical nature of Helena’s healing of the King are the play’s subtly recurring images that weave in contemporary medical and alchemical discussions. There are two strong Paracelsian concepts at work: that each disease exists in close physical proximity to its cure, and that disease is cured by that which has caused it (the unity of medicine and disease: curing like with like; see the discussion of sonnets 118 and 119 in my introductory chapter).

These are evident in Helena’s most Paracelsian lines, both occurring in the play’s first act. The first line demonstrates the relationship of the disease to the cure: “Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie / Which we ascribe to heaven” (1.1.216-17). Paracelsus often stresses his belief that the cure is always close at hand to the disease. When not found preexisting in the body, the cure must be found in the location where the disease occurred: “The physician should try not to depend upon the number of boxes and medicines from faraway countries and not to look so far from home. He should cast his eyes down like a maiden and then he will find at his feet more treasures against all diseases than we could find in India, Egypt, Greece, and other foreign countries” (Paracelsus “Diseases” 188). Hyperbole aside, Paracelsian medicine places the cure within the body and underneath one’s shadow. While the Hippocratic corpus explores
certain diseases and their relationships to local environments, Paracelsus narrows the scope dramatically. Where the Hippocratic school summarizes approaches for regiment based on biomes (swamps, mountainous regions, coastal plains, as explored in *Airs, Waters, and Places*), Paracelsus demands that cures always be found literally within arm’s reach.

Helena’s speech closing act 1 quickly becomes Paracelsian: “The mightiest space in fortune nature brings / To join like likes and kiss like native things” (1.1.222-23). This echoes the way Paracelsus defies the counteracting, rebalancing concepts of humoralism and embraces curing by likes rather than opposites: “As the disease is, so also is the medicine: if the disease is entrusted to the herbs, it will be healed by means of herbs. If it is under the stones, it will also be nourished under them; if it is subject to fasting, it must be driven away by fasting” (Paracelsus *Four Treatises* 18-19).  

Paracelsus held the core belief that true learning could come from studying only two books. God provided man with the first, Holy Scripture, as well as the second—the book of Nature: all other writing is superfluous if not obstructive or outright harmful to

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8 As is typical with Paracelsian writing, there is some seeming contradiction in the larger context of this passage. Demonic possession is treated as “the great disease” for which “Christ demonstrates the remedy” (19). That is to say, possession is a disease that is not treated directly with the correct dose of additional demons, but rather with the application of the words of Christ. It seems in this particular instance (exorcism), that Paracelsian healing demonstrates a more hydraulic, if not Galenic, geometry of healing through opposites. Further complicating the issue is the official and traditional doctrine that demonic possession is possible only by permission of the divine, so that the ultimate cause of possession is that God allowed it to happen. In this line of reasoning, the application of Christ’s words would indeed be a sort of treatment of like for like.
understanding the complex relationship of the microcosm to the macrocosm. Scripture and Nature may have their place on the bookshelves of the reportedly unsuccessful Paracelsian doctors of the play as well as in the study of Helena’s father, and she is clearly familiar with medical texts. In the early seventeenth century, “Middle class women as well as the nobility were both well read and experienced in medical skills” (Radbill 237). Certainly the medical writers would be known by the courtly circles, but what about common Geoffrey Groundling, and the rest of the great unwashed? In an essay on pathology of the period, L.J. Rather suggests that “Shakespeare evidently considered it possible to impute not only hysteria to a man but a uterus. . . as well, without fear of misunderstanding by his audience” (107).

However, what we see of Helena’s sources for medical treatment demonstrates less a personal journey into Scripture and Nature than the handing down of acquired knowledge from her father Gerard:

You know my father left me some prescriptions
Of rare and prov’d effects, such as his reading
And manifest experience had collected
For general sovereignty. (1.3.221-24)

9 “For if Christ says: Perscrutamini Scripturas, why should I not say of this: Perscrutamini Naturas Rerum?” Paracelsus, “Seven Defensiones,” in Four Treatises 15.

10 The passage referred to is King Lear 2.4.56-58: “O, how this mother swells up toward my Heart! / Hysterica passio, down, thy climbing sorrow, / Thy element’s below.” How do we know his audience didn’t misunderstand? Is it possible to compare to today’s audiences, who would draw on personal experience and reading?
Gerard’s “manifest experience” echoes cleanly with Paracelsus’s cry that all who wish to discover the truth must sell all they own and buy a pair of sturdy boots. It is experience in the world at large, particularly in exploring nature and interrogating old peasant healing women, which will lead the student to true knowledge—not regurgitating an unquestioned orthodoxy. “The traveler would also learn what seemed to be overlooked by the medieval compilers; that species and diseases were localized phenomena, Providence having provided in any one locality and for any one nation, everything required for material needs” (Webster From Paracelsus 55). To seek first-hand experience with the greater world is to follow the central precept of reading the book of nature.

The knowledge of local cures and the need to discover them is echoed in Cordelia’s invocation from King Lear:

All blest secrets,
All you unpublish’d virtues of the earth,
Spring with my tears; be aidant and remediate
In the good man’s distress. Seek, seek for him,
Lest his ungovern’d rage dissolve the life
That wants the means to lead it. (4.4.15-20)

Cordelia’s hylozoistic plea echoes Paracelsian theory and reminds us of Helena’s situation. There is a sick King to be cured. The cure will be made from local mineral ingredients—but only if the secrets of nature are revealed. Cordelia does not necessarily know the “blest secrets” or the “unpublished virtues,” but she knows they exist. Since time is of the essence, there is no time to consider a knowledgeable healer—Cordelia
must instead ask the secrets and virtues to publish themselves and apply themselves to Lear. It is fascinating to see the contrast in applied abilities between Helena and Cordelia alongside the similarity in respect for the secret knowledge involved in healing.

Yet while the virtues are for Cordelia still “unpublished,” the knowledge that has come down to Helena has been published (at least in manuscript form). We must question the nature of her father Gerard’s “reading.” Since it is in series with “manifest experience,” we assume it is of a different nature than merely reading the book of nature. That is, Helena’s line proves her father’s actual reading of texts. Are these medical texts? Did Gerard, like the Physician in The Canterbury Tales, read Aesculapius, Dioscorides, Hippocrates, Galen, Rhazes, and Avicenna, but not the Bible? Did Gerard read Scripture? We cannot know either way, but since the literacy question is introduced, and there is literary precedent (Chaucer) for going into details of a physician’s textual repertoire, it merits consideration. Is there something to be found in the absence of named medical authority? What sources would Shakespeare have considered valid?

The overall result of this line of questioning is that we cannot categorize the textual background of Gerard’s knowledge as either Galenic or Paracelsian: he read someone, but we don’t know who. The presence of an author’s name would be helpful, but this is not the case. The quiet mysteriousness itself, combined with the abovementioned passing-down of written prescriptions “Of rare and proved effects” implies a provenance consistent with the accumulation (or dissipation) of alchemical

11 “Wel knew he the olde Esculapius, / And Deyscorides, and eek Rufus, / Olde Ypocras, Haly, and Galyen, / Serapion, Razis, and Avycen, / Averrois, Damascien, and Constantyn, / Bernard, and Gatesden, and Gilbertyn,” and “His studie was but litel on the Bible” (General Prologue 429-34 and 438).
knowledge. Although this connection may seem tenuous on its own, the final word in the above passage provides a critical clue for understanding the type of medicine Helena is prepared to administer: her “prescriptions / Of rare and proved effects” are for “general sovereignty.” The medicine allows the monarch to rule over sickness, and also calls to mind the ubiquitous and “traditional alchemical relationship between the virgin and the sick king” (Haley 64). “Her diagnosis is Paracelsian” (Haley 101).

English alchemical treatises demonstrate the close relationship of the king to alchemy—traditionally known as “the royal art.” Perfection of matter and the sovereign presence are thoroughly intertwined in George Ripley’s 1471 *The Compound of Alchemy*. Ripley, Canon of Bridlington and alchemical enthusiast, composed a metrically reckless and intentionally confusing verse presentation of natural philosophy, personal spirituality, animal imagery, numerology, astrological sensitivities, arcane history, and laboratory processes. Ripley’s text shines as an example of English alchemical writing. It contains one of the earliest and richest depictions of alchemical imagery in the English language. The *Compound* begins with an epistle to Edward IV, in which Ripley praises the king in the first four lines, before suggesting that all is not well in the kingdom:

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Wherefore I trust thys Lond shalbe renewed
With Joy and Riches, with Charyty and Peace,
So that old ranckors understrewed,
Tempestuous troubles and wretchednes shall cease.
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The king is not ill in body, but rather the extended corpus of the monarch is subjected to “ranckors” and “tempestuous troubles and wretchednes.” The *OED* shows “rancor” as a
“deep-rooted and bitter ill feeling,” with etymological roots in the classical Latin *rancere*, to be rotten or putrid. It is most interesting that a contemporary example yokes together the concepts of rancor and wretchedness: as occurring in the heart\(^\text{12}\) (the emotional center, not the cardiac muscle itself, but still maintaining pectoral similitude with the explicit description of the king in Painter’s version of the *Decameron* story). These “troubles” are undoubtedly the Wars of the Roses in general, and, given Ripley’s conspicuous “An. Dom 1471” postscript, Edward’s recovery of the throne in April that same year after the brief Readeption of Henry VI. The twin implications of the nation’s rancorous body and the ascension of Edward to his rightful throne are pregnant with alchemical-king hydraulics. Ripley’s alchemy thus diagnoses the illness of the King’s other body—the Land—and offers a prognosis of renewal.

To the modern skeptical reader, the opening epistle to Edward IV reads like a con in progress, a guilty man’s slick pursuit of co-conspiracy. Ripley claims he has found

The perfect waye of most secrete *Alchimy*,
Which I wyll never trewly for Merke ne for Pounde
Make common but to you, and that conditionally
That to your selfe ye shall keepe it full secretly. (Q3v)

Ripley has thus mastered the secrets of alchemy, but will never reveal his secrets (not even for marks or pounds!) to anyone but Edward IV. It is a secret that must be kept

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\(^{12}\) 1450 *Jacob's Well* (1900) 249 Whanne thou mercyfully forgeuyst thi wrongys, wyth-oute wrecche & rankure in herte, that is mercy.
between the two of them and used only for good. After all, the knowledge is the “secrete
treasure” of God himself, “his greate gift and previtie.” Only six stanzas into Ripley’s
work, we see already how alchemy is tied to the concept of the King, a very real faith in
God, and the necessity to keep powerful secrets in the hands of the good-intentioned and
away from those who would use the secrets of nature toward unjust ends.

How, then, does Ripley intend to both protect and present the secret? How can
God’s “secrete treasure” be revealed to the deserving and concealed from the rest?
Ripley promises that part of the alchemical process must be explained tete-a-tete in order
to reveal its great simplicity and awesome power. As for the rest of the necessary
information, Ripley assures Edward

        But notwithstanding for perill that might befall,
        Though I dare not here plainly the knot unbind,
        Yet in my writeing I wyll not be so Mysticall,
        But that ye may by studie the knowleige find. (Q2r)

This brief passage is the conceptual touchstone for alchemical writing—the reader is
promised a body of truth wrapped in a shroud of mystery. In this case, the metaphor is
one of untying a knot. Once undone, we can imagine a straight rope of knowledge
demonstrating the linear process of manipulating and perfecting materials: a linear
approach, but one braided of the separate strands of knowledge, faith, and labor. Ripley’s
particular brand of textual obscurity is not so severe as other alchemical treatises: he tells
the reader that the writing will not be obvious, but it will also not be entirely
impenetrable: ultimately, it is the King’s business.
This tradition of veiling the secrets of alchemy through obfuscation is presented by Subtle in Jonson’s *The Alchemist*:

Was not all the knowledge
Of the Egyptians writ in mystic symbols?
Speak not the scriptures oft in parables?
Are not the choicest fables of the poets,
That were the fountains and first springs of wisdom,
Wrapt in perplexed allegories? (2.3.205-9)

While the process is hidden in mystical language, the materials used are very physical and earthly. The principal base, the primary matter that the alchemical process depends upon, is not a mystical substance or a combination of substances, but is revealed by Ripley to be a “greate secret right nedefull it is to know, / That though the *Philosophers* speake plurally, / All is but one Thing…/ Whereof doth spring both Whyte and Red naturally.” That is, the colors and the convoluted language come together for one purpose—a unity of material:

For all the parts of our most precious *Stone*,
As I can preve, be Coessentiall and concrete;
Moreover there is no true principle but one;
Full long it was er I therwith could mete:
Who can reduce it, and knoweth his Heate,
And only kinde with kinde can redresse,
Till filth originall be clensed from his Seat,
Likely he is to finde our secrets both more and lesse. (Q4v)
The principal matter of the process, the Philosophers’ Stone, is the single most recognizable alchemical icon. We can see from Ripley’s overview of the alchemical project, that it must be treated “only kinde with kinde,” that is, like with like. Just like iatrochemistry contrasted with humoral treatment, it is not a process of rebalancing a closed system, but rather of separating and purifying similar rather than opposite traits.

Because we the readers must remain onlookers, we are no closer to creating our own Stone or projecting it upon materials to achieve perfection. There is an impenetrable bond of secrecy between the King and his alchemist, the King and his healer: both become complicit in the secret steps needed to achieve the final projection of the liquid stone.

Before Helena can attempt her alchemical healing on the King, she must, as is tradition, gain his trust and enter into a complicit and secretive (or at least private) trust. The practice of alchemy is not a public one, and the King is traditionally the only fit witness as well as the most prominent metaphor within the process.

Helena has several obstacles to overcome in order to gain not a simple audience, but the role of healer to the King. The first is introduced by the jokester Lavatch, whose song “Was this the fair face” ties Helena through her name to the destruction of King Priam (1.3.70-79). While playful and possibly a moment for some stage business and light entertainment for the play’s audience, the implications are sinister. Helena’s very name now carries connotations of war and the toppling of royal towers: not exactly the kind of credentials kings expect of their healers.
And credentials were exactly what the Countess called into question in her discussion with Helena’s desire to heal the King:

But think you, Helen,
If you should tender your supposed aid,
He would receive it?  He and his physicians
Are of a mind; he, that they cannot help him,
They, that they cannot help.  How shall they credit
A poor unlearned virgin, when the schools,
Emboweled of their doctrine, have left off
The danger to itself?  (1.3.235-42)

The Countess defines Helena’s major obstacle as at least twofold in the phrase “unlearned virgin.” Helena lacks official schooling in either Galenic or Paracelsian medicine, and she is, after all, a She. It seems that lack of official credentials alone is not necessarily grounds for denial, but combined with the fact that she is a woman, the doubt in Helena’s ability seems insurmountable. While Helena does not hold the cards of university education or masculinity, she goes all in: “I’d venture / The well-lost life of mine on his grace’s cure,” literally betting her life on her ability to heal the King (1.3.247-48).

The play’s second act begins with the King taking his dramatic farewells, as his condition makes him expect imminent death. Lafew asks the King if he “would” be cured. No. There is then at least a partial introduction of the alchemical process when Lafew tells the King:

O, will you eat
No grapes, my royal fox? Yes, but you will
My noble grapes, and if my royal fox
Could reach them. I have seen a medicine
That’s able to breathe life into a stone,
Quicken a rock, and make you dance canary
With spritely fire and motion; whose simple touch
Is powerful to araise King Pepin, nay,
To give great Charlemain a pen in ‘s hand
And write her a love-line. (2.1.69-78)

The allusion to Aesop’s “Fox and the Grapes” is consistent with the tradition of veiling alchemical information in fable, parable, or metaphor. The audience is engaged and possibly distracted. The medicine that can bring a stone to life and revive past kings is undoubtedly alchemical in nature: the “simple touch” is the climactic projection of the Philosopher’s Stone onto its subject matter—in this case bringing Merovingian kings back from the dead.

When the King asks to whom Charlemagne would be writing a love-line, Lafew names Helena in such a way that elevates her above her previous status as unlearned virgin: she is now “Doctor She!” (2.1.79) Helena is then brought into the King’s presence and begins to explain the transmission of knowledge from her father Gerard de Narbon:

On’s bed of death
Many receipts he gave me; chiefly one,
Which, as the dearest issue of his practice
He bade me store up as a triple eye,
Safer than mine own two, more dear. I have so,
And hearing your high majesty is touched
With that malignant cause wherein the honour
Of my dear father’s gift stands chief in power,
I come to tender it, and my appliance,
With all bound humbleness. (2.1.104-14)

This one receipt is the abovementioned prescription for “sovereignty,” for the highest type of healing, or healing of the highest patient. This prescription is “chief in power,” that is, fitting only for a king. The King’s language in response to Helena’s claim suggests that he is aware of the alchemical nature of her receipt, and is therefore skeptical:

We thank you, maiden,
But may not be so credulous of cure,
When our most learned doctors leave us and
The congregated College have concluded
That laboring art can never ransom nature
From her inaidible estate. I say we must not
So stain our judgment or corrupt our hope
To prostitute our past-cure malady
To empirics, or to dissever so
Our great self and our credit, to esteem
A senseless help when help past sense we deem. (2.1.114-24)

The King is concerned that credentialed healers from the College of Physicians have judged him past healing. It is beneath him and would raise false hopes to trust an irregular physician, an empiric, to achieve what the “congregated College” could not.
Sonnet 147 shows another healer that abandons the patient to suffer the disease. In the sonnet, however, the patient is abandoned for not following orders:

My reason, the physician to my love,
Angry that his prescriptions are not kept,
Hath left me, and I desperate now approve
Desire is death, which physic did except.
Past cure I am, now reason is past care,
And frantic mad with evermore unrest. (lines 5-10)

The sonnet describes the poet’s disease as a fever of love, not a fistula. But the two patients, the lover and the King, share despair for suffering the diseases to their respective conclusions of madness and death. Helen Vendler notes that the sonnet “explains the illness to the woman rather than to the self,” which is “the single most salient aesthetic choice of the poem—to turn to address the woman” (Vendler 619). The King’s speech on the despair of his condition is also directed toward the woman—the difference, of course, lying in Helena’s role as proposed physician rather than cause of the disease.

The King’s speech reflects a very common concern regarding irregular physicians. In her fascinating chapter on female medical practitioners in the period, Margaret Pelling discusses the surprising equality in verdicts and punishment given to male and female irregulars by the Royal College of Physicians. In cases where punishment was called for, “one-third of the female irregulars found guilty were not punished, one-third were fined with or without imprisonment, and a final third were punished in other ways” (Pelling 209). The males were treated more or less the same, but women were “slightly more likely to be let off without punishment” (Pelling 209).
Pelling’s study shows how the punishments are fines, relatively small amounts of jail time, and promises not to practice medicine in London (with the occasional pillory). Even in the well-known 1602 case in which Elizabeth Jackson was sentenced for inducing the demonic possession of Mary Glover (which caused Glover’s hysteria), the punishment was prison, a fine, and the pillory (see Kassell 115, Pelling 197, Healy 40). By digesting this enlightening statistical analysis of how the College identified, judged, and punished irregular physicians, Pelling et al. make seem all the more drastic Helena’s voluntary death sentence in case she fails to heal the King. It seems that the issue of Helena’s gender, if not entirely dismissed, is at least diminished: the main concern is her accreditation. The King may be projecting his despair onto the College as a way of excusing himself from responsible self-awareness. Instead of speaking on the significance of his own imminent death, the King demonstrates concern that he not be subjected to discreditable quacks.

Helena’s banter with the King should be considered the beginning of her treatment. Consider, for instance, how she has used rhyming couplets in the play up to her exchange with the King. The blank verse dialogue between Helena and the King describes a careful negotiation until Helena reveals that she will accept no payment for her services, “My duty then shall pay me for my pains” (2.1.125). The king replies with one hypersyllabic line, “I cannot give thee less, to be called grateful” (129) before moving into rhyming couplets—no fewer than 80 of which fill out the remainder of the scene. In the context of dating the play as one of Shakespeare’s earlier texts, Leggatt describes this part of the scene as “gnomic rhyming couplets by which Helena persuades
the King to try her skill” (10). Zitner suggests that these rhymed couplets (2.1.129) emphasize “the other-worldliness of the scene” (Zitner 57). Haley (who thinks the gnomic couplets anticipate Shakespeare’s late, courtly style) recognizes the dramatic urgency of the lines, wherein Helena’s “boldness of thought comes to the fore with a surprising freedom barely restrained by the formal couplets” (Haley 103). It is the King himself who initiates the transition from blank verse to rhyming couplets, suggesting that he has entered into shared lines, shared speech—the shared secrecy between the healing alchemist and the King.

Once into her oracular rhyming, Helena ventures a string of biblical exempla of God’s works succeeding through unlikely human vehicles: “He that of greatest works is finisher / Oft does them by the weakest minister” (2.1.136-37).13 She continues to diminish the role and degree of her own power, imputing the sovereign power onto the medicine and healing. This gains her more attention, if not credit, and Helena and the King share a rhyme for the first time in two brief end-stopped lines:

KING. Proffers not took reap thanks for their reward.

HELENA. Inspired merit so by breath is barred. (2.1.148-49)

They share a line and a rhyme for the first time soon after, when the King seems more convinced of her ability and asks her how long it will be until he is cured. It seems that now the King is willing to allow for hope, which was explicitly unthinkable at the beginning of the scene.

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13 The divinely inspired character of her healing is echoed later by the line which Parolles begins and Lafew concludes: “…and he’s of as most facinerious spirit that will not acknowledge it to be the—[Lafew:] Very hand of heaven” (2.3.26-8).
KING.   Art thou so confident? Within what space
Hop’st thou my cure?

HELENA.  The greatest grace lending grace,
Ere twice the horses of the sun shall bring
Their fiery torcher his diurnal ring,
Ere twice in murk and occidental damp
Moist Hesperus hath quenched her sleepy lamp,
Or four and twenty times the pilot’s glass
Hath told the thievish minutes how they pass,
What is infirm from your sound parts shall fly,
Health shall live free, and sickness freely die. (2.1.159-68)

Helena’s speech sounds like a strange and highly florid poetic incantation—perhaps in all
the English canon the most verbose and indirect way of saying “A day.” It might be
suggested that the heliotropic language reflects the tendency of alchemical treatises to
look upwards and tie the motions of the heavens directly to the spagyric process, linking
what is above with what is below. At the end of the incantation comes Helena’s most
Paracelsian formulation in the play: “What is infirm from your sound parts shall fly, /
Health shall live free, and sickness freely die” (2.1.167-68). The sickness, in flying from
the body and dying, is an explicitly Paracelsian ens—a physical thing that can be
removed from the body, and not merely a humoral imbalance. We also see the
alchemical purification of matter—separating the impure from the pure—the infirm from
the sound: Ripley’s “Till filth original be cleansed from his seat.” This couplet is nothing
if not a clear depiction of the most basic spagyric alchemical image.
To pursue the rhyming couplets even further, Helena and the King have back-to-back couplets (each ending with “die”) highlighting their moment of agreement in a quatrain:

KING.   Sweet practiser, thy physic I will try,
      That ministers thine own death if I die.
HELENA.  If I break time, or flinch in property
      Of what I spoke, unpitied let me die.   (2.1.185-88)

The brief clarity of the language and the repetition of “die” shows this exchange to be the moment wherein Helena and the King enter into and verbally sign a contract laying out the expectations, terms, and conditions of the cure. The King will allow her to attempt a cure, and she offers her life for collateral should the cure not work within a day. In the event of her failure, Helena takes upon herself the quality of a disease, which the King would be cured of by her death.

The King is now completely committed to allow Helena’s attempt at cure. He has overcome his multiple obstacles of false hope, fear of empirics, and being past cure: “More should I question thee, and more I must— / Though more to know could not be more to trust” (2.1.205-6). The unlearned virgin, Dr. She, now has the King’s complete trust: there is nothing more she could say to convince him of her qualifications and earnestness.

Helena and the King, absent from the brief second scene in Act Two, are introduced in the third scene through a dialogue between Lafew and Parolles. These two courtiers have received the news of the King’s return to health. Marvelling at the
seemingly supernatural, mind-blowing success of Helena’s cure, Lafew describes “A showing of a heavenly effect in an earthly actor,” to which Parolles agrees “That’s it I would have said, the very same” (2.3.26). It is, continues Lafew, the “Very hand of heaven” (31). This echoes the tradition that the alchemist draws upon divine power which has created natural sympathies between heavens and earthly elements. The King places his attention not on the supernatural, but on the human element, instructing Helena to “Sit, my preserver, by thy patient’s side,” in order that she may receive her reward from “this healthful hand, whose banished sense / Thou hast repealed” (47-49). Although it is the first time we learn that lack of sensation in his hand was one of his earlier symptoms, the focus maintains consistency in the hand as a symbol of regal bounty and justice. Helena, ever humble, reintroduces the divine aspect of the healing process, stating that “Heaven hath through me restored the king to health” (64). While she is the vehicle by which the healing travelled, the ultimate cure is divine—an appropriately alchemical model for treating him who rules by divine right. The supernatural, divine agency of disease and cure is also precisely Paracelsian: in the “Seven Defensiones” of his *Four Treatises*, Paracelsus reminds us that “Heaven makes the disease: the physician drives it away again” (19). While taken out of context this quote may seem to put the healer at odds with Heaven—a human mechanic that must fix what Heaven has broken—the overall purpose is to show that the physician uses knowledge and skills to direct supernatural influence where it can do the most good. Paracelsus constantly reminds us that physicians are a working part of God’s direct plan for mankind:

God wants that the treasures and wonders which he has demonstrated in the metals be investigated and discovered, for which reason he has
indicated the art of discovery. And he has also taught the necessity of separating the ores of silver and of gold. Now since these things have been arranged by God and since the diseases arise nevertheless, then it follows that the physician has been created because of these things, so that he may prevent, forestall and investigate the diseases that arise according to God’s plan. (Four Treatises 81)

Is it appropriate to suggest that Shakespeare presents a combined medical (iatrochemical) and supernatural (divine) healing? L.J. Rather reminds us of the physician in Macbeth, who shows that “moral disturbances, as such, fell within the therapeutic province of the divine rather than the physician” (110). Does it follow, then, that physical disturbances fall only within the therapeutic province of the physician? This question is answered unanimously, spoken by all on stage in response to Helena’s claim that Heaven restored the King through her: “We understand it, and thank heaven for you” (2.3.65). Not only have all the trained physicians failed previously, it is only through the combination of a de facto physician and divine influence that the King is healed.

In Paracelsian medicine God created medicine, but man must use the spagyric arts to remove the impure from the pure (Gordon 598-99). These arts, as mentioned above, are to remain a secret between the alchemist and the King. This is why the actual process of Helena’s cure happens offstage; the court and the audience are allowed to see the aftermath of the healing, but are not part of the process and are not fit to witness the secret art.

It is because of this unseen act of healing, combined with earlier banter between Helena and Parolles, that the role of Helena is often read as a sexual healing. The tradition of oversexualizing Helena has detrimentally shifted the focus of critical approaches of All’s Well That Ends Well from the higher possibilities of engaging with
the history of ideas down to the low-hanging fruit of double-entendre genital humor. Such readings ignore Shakespeare’s aim in this scene to stress the public results of the esoteric mystery.

A simple example of excessively sexual interpretation can be found in Russell Fraser’s footnotes to the New Cambridge edition of the play. When Bertram refuses Helena’s hand in marriage, the King reminds Bertram that “Thou know’st she has raised me from my sickly bed.” Bertram then asks “But follows it, my lord, to bring me down / Must answer for your raising?” (2.3.111-13). There are several ways of enjoying this passage. Firstly, Shakespeare has created an engaging visual contrast between the King’s healthful elevation and Bertram’s perceived social demotion. This hydraulic action in the court, that an object is moved by an opposing force, is distasteful to Bertram. Fraser’s footnote describes this interaction as being read “with a sexual quibble, which justifies the eccentric-seeming association, at 2.1.93, of Lafew and Pandarus.” We might also recall the phallic rising and falling of sonnet 151, an example thankfully overlooked by the sexual critics. In the sonnet, the poet embraces the betrayal of reason, descent to carnality, and the subsequent sexual arousal, or rising. The parallel fails, of course, when we realize that Bertram’s fall is an undesirable and perceived social demotion—whereas the “fall” in the last line of the sonnet is undeniably a post-coital diminution.

While there certainly are moments of sexualized language surrounding Helena, to focus on her as a primarily sexual healer diminishes her role as an iatrochemical healer and as a vehicle for what everyone on stage has already agreed is a divine interaction. Richard Levin, in his recent work Shakespeare’s Schemers seems to have forgotten the
consensus of the divine nature of the work, and winks at us when he suggests that “if Helena’s healing is not supernatural but natural powers, then those powers, the play has earlier hinted, are sexual” (77-78).

Levin oversexualizes the scene, thus oversimplifying it. It is true that Helena is a sexual character. Her healing of the King is in the first place aimed toward achieving a partnership with Bertrand. She uses her healing to gain a husband, a de facto sexual partner. When he refuses her a true carnal marriage, Helena travels to Italy to perform her other major action in the play: the bed trick. The bed trick is socially, morally, historically, and interpretively complex, but it is, at the end, sex. She is thus a highly sexual character. But we must remember that she has sex with her husband and only with her husband. There is sex in the play, but it is puerile and culturally anachronistic to argue that Shakespeare meant his audience to understand that Helena cured the King through masturbation.

There certainly are plenty of readers who wish to focus on the potentially ribald language, and speculate on possible inflection and gesture that the more randy actor may wish to impose on Lafew and Parolles. Stronger than hints of sexuality, much more likely than the imagined action of Helena administering some type of Viagra or erotic massage treatment to the king offstage,14 are the very real and stated sources and goals of Helena’s cure. Her cure is medical and divine, based on written prescription and the experience of her late father Gerard de Narbonne. It is easier and perhaps more enticing

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14 Onstage, too. John Barton’s 1967 RSC production featured Estelle Kohler, in the role of Helena, putting her hands under the King’s bedsheets.
to read for potential groundling juice than to heed the oft-repeated invocations of the
divine elements of the healing. Several authors, of course, deal with both the sexual and
the divine, and several more deal admirably and thoroughly with the divine elements
alone. Those readings are most convincing.

Susan Snyder suggests that in Lafew’s description of Helena’s medicine in
2.1.71-77, Lafew “presents Helen to the ailing King less as a doctor to treat him than as a
woman to arouse him” (24). In her reading of the passage, Snyder focuses on the
implications of tumescence in stone, rock, and arousal: Helena “quickens, she gives fire
and motion, she could produce tumescence even in kings long dead” (24). With attention
only to the surface meaning of these images, we would end up understanding Helena as a
cross between Viagra spokeswoman and the subject of Marvin Gaye’s hit single.
However, the stone is hard even before it has life: it is transformed not from a flaccid
mass into rigid material, but from inanimate to living. While the contracted “pen in’s
hand” may quite possibly be suggestive (at least on the page, if not to the ear), the main
purpose of this passage is an accurate description of the perfecting and transformative
nature of the alchemical quintessence or elixir vitae.

Lest this should turn into a spittle-flecked rant defending the honor of Helena and
her skill as a nontraditional iatrochemical physician, it should be noted that this argument
does not require Shakespeare to present a strong feminist character. The obvious
problem in suggesting that Shakespeare was making any kind of feminist move (apart
from anachronism of the F-word itself), or following Paracelsus’s suggestion of gleaning
medical knowledge from the older peasant women with lifelong experience in healing, is the source material for the story of "All’s Well That Ends Well."

Shakespeare drew from Painter’s *The Palace of Pleasure*, the English translation of Boccaccio and other Italian and French authors. Giletta, the source character for Helena, is the healing daughter of Gerard de Narbonne in the *The Decameron*, appearing in Painter’s version of the story “Giletta of Narbon.” Leggatt characterizes Shakespeare’s use of Boccaccio as taking “a story that in other hands aims at straightforward satisfaction, and complicates it” (Leggatt 5). Shakespeare indeed complicates what in *The Palace* and *The Decameron* is a very simple healing.

In Painter’s story, the

French king had a swelling upon his breast, which by reason of ill cure was growen to be a Fistula, which did put him to maruelous paine and grieve, and that there was no Phisition to be found (although many were proued) that could heale it, but rather did impaire the grieve and made it worse and worse…. Wheereupon with such knowledge as she had learned at her father’s hands before time, shee made a powder of certain herbes, which she thought meete for that disease. (172)

The fistula is more medically comprehensible in this account: we see the futile ministrations of previous physicians have aggravated a swelling into more of an abscess.

The nontraditional healer’s medicine is also quite simple: Giletta recreates an herbal powder devised by her father. Upon the King’s sceptical response to her request, Giletta presents an argument that is echoed in Shakespeare: “Sir, you dispise my knowledge because I am yonge and a woman, but I assure you that I do not minister Phisicke by profession, but by the aide and helpe of God: and with the cunning of maister Gerardo of Narbona, who was my father, and a Phisition of great fame so longe as he liued” (172).
The Doctor She character says bluntly and outright that her herbal medicine is also divine in nature. The moment of healing happens in the prose equivalent of offstage—away from the direct narrative present: Giletta has eight days to heal the king, which pass (in part) in a single sentence “The yong maiden began to minister her Phisicke, and in short space before her appointed time, she had throughly cured the king” (173).

While her legitimacy as a healer is called into question owing to her gender, there is no hint of ribaldry or sexual wordplay/cure in Painter’s version. In Painter, Gerard was not connected to the court. It is also noteworthy that there is no text, no source recipe for the medicine: Giletta relies on her personal experience witnessing her father create the medicine. We do not know specifically what kind of textual experience Gerardo had in his medical training. The medicine as it appears in Painter is a plot device; the healing happening in one line is simple.

It is worth noting that the Giletta story of The Decameron, story 3.9, is told by the Queen. This provides some context for why there would even exist an episode about a sick king, and could suggest a reason for allowing a nontraditional female healer to take center stage. That the medicine is a special powder provides a smooth thematic transition from story 3.8, and the role of Giletta reflects the feminine interest in narrative involvement. Of course, we must be careful not to see Boccaccio as some kind of proto-feminist. Virginia Brown addresses this issue in her introduction to a recent edition of Boccaccio’s Famous Women, the first such collection (outside of hagiography) cataloguing admirable female acts. Brown reminds us that although Boccaccio is writing about women, even the praiseworthy are not to be considered equal to men: “Such praise
as they do merit they do not earn *qua* female; the highest accolade Boccaccio can bestow upon a woman is to describe her as “man-like” or as a woman capable of deeds beyond the powers of most men” (xviii-xix). By taking on the story of the unlearned virgin developing into Doctor She, Shakespeare has complicated the issue considerably: gender is not the only obstacle in gaining access to the King. Helena’s very methods, alchemical in nature and ultimately successful in causing the infirm parts to fly, projecting health and the return of sensation to the King’s hand, reach far beyond mere storytelling and into the very real medical discussion of the day. Even the specifically morbific language in the play is given multiple roles: “The words ‘contagion,’ ‘corrupt,’ ‘defile,’ and ‘malignant’ are all potentially functioning in the moral/psychic, as well as in the physical (disease-transmission) domain” (Healy 41). Awareness of these connotations ought to increase our amazement at Helena’s triumph over the skepticism of the court: she is involved with both the King’s physical and moral selves. Pettigrew argues that the title Dr. She, “juxtaposing as it does the learned with the female, reads, from the authorities’ point of view, as a contradiction, if not an abomination” (42). Shakespeare provides an arena wherein this abomination, this contradiction, is presented to the audience as a misunderstanding of the how medicine might actually work. He shows us both Galen and Paracelsus, the congregated college, the schools of medicine, and adds to them a poor physician’s daughter. Pettigrew provides a complementary line of argument to this reading:

In short, *All’s Well*, in its manipulation of the understood narratives of female healers, works to expand the imaginative possibilities of its
audience. It enters the ethical debate over medical practice, plainly contradicting the conservative, professional view. The play stands, simply put, as a radical case for greater tolerance in medical practice. (60)

This is not to say (and Pettigrew is also not making the case) that this is Shakespeare behaving out of character as sort of radical: his plays are the product of his imagination, which is always radical. This play particularly presents a strong position for transgressing the limits of gender in medicine: “Shakespeare’s play invokes the controversy and makes a bold comment by suggesting that female medical practice may be valuable after all….Helena’s practice, and by extension, the non-licensed female practice she represents, is given royal endorsement” (Pettigrew 51). Despite Pettigrew’s otherwise thorough treatment of the female-doctor dynamic and its complexities in the period, the above claims overlook at least two major aspects of Helena’s healing. First is the fact that Helena never claims the medicine to be her own: as we have seen above, she is merely trotting out the same prescription that her father taught her on his deathbed. She is more messenger than author. Secondly, in Pettigrew’s very adept appreciation of the contemporary debates over female empirics, two main classes of she-doctors are illuminated: those of the gentry, and those of the common folk. To simplify the author’s discussion, Pettigrew shows that there was a direct relationship between socioeconomic class and the tolerance of female healers: a Lady was likely to be praised for her efforts in promoting health through well-read midwifery, while lower-class crones peddling healing waters and herbs were highly suspect according to authorities on the issue.
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We must ask, if we are performing the mental exercise of excising Helena from a literary version of fourteenth-century Italy into turn-of-the-seventeenth century England, how we expect Doctor She to be treated. Does she clearly fall into certain categories? Bertram calls her class into question, appalled that he is to be dragged downward by a poor physician’s daughter. But allowing for the subjectivity not only of dramatic action, but of human nature at large, how do we treat the issue of Helena’s striking beauty? Are we to assume that the ailing were entirely incapable of rational transference? She may be a woman, but she never claims her physic to be anything other than 1) direct from her highly-respected physician father, 2) highly effective, and 3) backed by the promise of her own life. Coupled with endorsements from Lafew and the Countess, how could the King refuse?

While Pettigrew’s claim that *All’s Well* is Shakespeare’s “radical case for greater tolerance in medical practice” (60) is both well-phrased and exciting, it must be remembered that, as Pettigrew himself asserts, the play is two parts medical and three parts social. The fact that it ends well at all is due to the social elements, not the medical. Allison Kavey’s recent book on natural philosophy and secret knowledge discusses how recipes are gendered female writing that ultimately provides access to alchemy. Sharing similar equipment and step-by-step instructions, the two fields come together:

They bring the natural world under control in the feminine realm of the kitchen using an interesting combination of techniques and tools gathered from both masculine and feminine bodies of knowledge, particularly alchemy and cookery. These two disciplines already shared the recipe as a form of communicating information about preparing specific substances, and the belief that recipes when performed correctly dependably produce the same results. (Kavey 99)
The play is Paracelsian in that it allows contravention of social standing in Helena’s marriage to Bertram. Demonstrating a sexual application of affinities (rather than opposites), Bertram’s intended infidelity (and potential moral dis-ease) is preventively treated in kind through Helena’s bed-trick. The play is alchemical in the elevation of Helena’s social status, the cure of the sick King using medicine that can animate stone, and the ultimate separation, purification, and recombination of the couple into a (albeit nervous and potentially unconvincing) marital unit.

Bertram’s dissatisfaction with the poor physician’s daughter makes us wonder. “Around 1604 the terms ‘poor physician’ and ‘poor physician’s daughter’ would have been almost as much an oxymoron as today” (Zitner 49). What Zitner fails to recognize in this statement is the courtly context of Bertram’s comment. By dismissing Helena through the combined vehicle of lineage and profession, Bertram places her distinctly outside the court despite the King’s endorsement resulting from the successful healing. The three word label of Helena illustrates Bertram’s personal concern for impermeability of court membership as well as possibly suggesting the contemporary discussions of “new men” and their recent socio-political ascensions.15

It is as she delivers the closing speech (a fourteen-line pseudo-sonnet) in the first scene of the play, making up her mind to travel to Paris and heal the King, that Helena states “Our remedies of in ourselves do lie” (1.1.216), the overtly Paracelsian line mentioned above. It is a wonderfully simple yet multidimensional thought for Helena to

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15 “Later, even after her virtue has triumphed in the cure of the King, Helena must struggle for recognition against the still more oppressive detraction implied in Bertram’s familiar contempt” (Haley 99).
have at this moment. She contains within herself the remedy for overcoming her self-
perceived inequalities with Bertram, at the same time hinting at the philosophy behind
her planned method for the King’s cure. If her speech is read as a sonnet (indeed, there
are end-stops suggesting three quatrains), a true turn happens in the closing couplet: what
had begun as a reflection on Parolles’ parting suggestion that she “Get thee a good
husband, and use him as he uses thee” (l.1.214) ends with a determined decision to use
disease as a tool for her success: “The king’s disease—my project may deceive me, / But
my intents are fixed and will not leave me” (1.1.228-29). The very mention of disease is
in itself a decisive moment. Pronouns that were previously in either the first person
plural or the third person (with the notable exceptions of the dreamily spoken “my love”
(l.1.220) “me see” and “mine eye” (l.1.221) ) come back into focus in the final couplet.
She has her project, her intents, and understands how they relate to her directly and
specifically.

In her chapter on “The Contest Over Medical Authority,” Deborah Harkness
demonstrates the vitriolic battle taking place on the printing presses of Elizabethan
London. The physicians struggled to maintain professional superiority over the barber-
surgeons, and both groups fought against unlicensed healers, quacks, and medicine
women. Professional, economic, social, and political hierarchies were asserted and
resisted. This may be reflected in Bertram’s disdain for stooping below his royal position
to be saddled with a mere physician’s daughter, but it is not enough to derail the play’s
momentum from medical to social: we do not yet care what he wants.
It is not the purpose of this study to pin only specific attitudes written by Paracelsus on and among the plays and poems of English literature, but rather to demonstrate ways in which seeds of greater Paracelsian influence finds purchase in these texts. Specific instances wherein we will see such influence are when traditional humoral (Galenic/Hippocratic) medicine fails; when images based on canonical medical theory are surpassed by newer iatrochemical models; and when women become healers.

Such instances are not purely “of Paracelsus,” but they are certainly to be understood as Paracelsian in tenor. By demonstrating models of contagion, illness, and cure, and discussing these topics that seem to be sympathetic with the Paracelsian rather than Hippocratic medical theories, we can see the ways in which iatrochemical thought makes inroads on the literary imagination of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century. Pettigrew describes the ways in which literary and medical texts interact as a “spiral of discourse” and “the cycle of culture” (160). When we feel in the literature the tensions surrounding transmission, diagnosis, and cure of disease, these tensions denote a very real debate happening in the schools and on the printing presses.
Chapter Three

Cold Comfort: Moving Toward a Chemical Shakespeare

There are five references to Galen in Shakespeare. The tone of each is disparaging, sarcastic, and suggestive of medical failure. In addition to *All’s Well That Ends Well* (1602), there is one reference in both *2 Henry IV* (1597) and *Coriolanus* (1607), and two references in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (1599). The sole reference to Paracelsus, from *All’s Well*, is also within the context of ineffectual cure. It will not be argued, therefore, that Shakespeare’s works demonstrate a playwright’s lifelong devotion to exploration of medical authorities. An example of how the author engages the topical issue of the Galen/Paracelsus debate was explored in the previous chapter.

Shakespeare’s use of medical language does not shine a bright light first on humoralism and then on Paracelsian iatrochemistry: it is more like the movement of a cast shadow. The current chapter will suggest that language from select plays may demonstrate a gradual shift from humoral to iatrochemical imagery. This will be an attempt to begin describing a geometry that, overlaying certain plays, will show how Shakespeare’s early heavy reliance on humoral imagery changes over the years, allowing for iatrochemical imagery. The uses of explicit medical language or metaphorical images utilizing medical vehicles are not necessarily limited to the discussion of bodily health.

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16 Falstaff’s reference in *2 Henry IV*, discussed below, may be an exception, but not radically so.
Up to and climaxing with *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (1599), Shakespeare’s plays are hyperhumoral. The period’s fascination with the humoral understanding of the body as exhibited through behavior and personality, especially melancholy, has been thoroughly and capably studied elsewhere. Any use of humors—especially melancholy—on stage in 1599 is likely to be a reference to Jonson’s humor plays, George Chapman’s *An Humorous Day’s Mirth*, and the prevailing fashions on London’s stages that made a heyday of satirizing the melancholy individual, portraying him as victim of humors brought on by his own self-interest.

However, before *Merry Wives*, Shakespeare does not explicitly satirize humoral temperaments. The humors are not simply shorthand for eccentric behavior of young, melancholic archetypes. The humoral system of the body provides a mechanical model that Shakespeare finds useful for describing hydraulic political, social, and romantic relationships. In *King John* (1596), the system functions in serious and meaningful ways. The closed humoral system has certain appeal for the stage: there is only one fragile condition of balance, yet so many different types of imbalance.

When in 1601-2 he introduced Paracelsus in *All’s Well*, Shakespeare may have been signaling a shift from humoral to iatrochemical imagery in the plays. Again, this is not a definitive watershed moment, before which all imagery runs into the humoral harbor and all imagery afterward flows into the iatrochemical ocean. But the passage of time seems to reveal Shakespeare’s growing willingness to engage with the idea that perhaps the “congregated college” is susceptible to criticism.
Stensgaard notes Shakespeare’s bias against the Royal College in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, suggesting that it may be related to his son-in-law Dr. John Hall who, like Helena, was unlicensed (187). It would be dangerous to derive too much of the play’s content from biography, but it is worthwhile to consider the practical material and intellectual context of London from the 1590s through the first decade of the next century. As seen in the introductory chapter, it is inaccurate to attribute Shakespeare’s use of newer medical models to a sense of progress. Nevertheless, these models allow the playwright to expand the base of material for imagery and metaphor.

As the composition of the plays progresses chronologically from 1596 to 1611, we see that Shakespeare’s overwhelmingly humoral usages of medical imagery begin to diminish in frequency before largely giving way to chemical imagery. We should keep in mind, despite its imprecision, one scholar’s generalization that as collected works, “the plays present a number of physicians, doctors, and healers, whose ministrations are often as metaphorical and symbolic as the diseases they attempt to cure. Shakespeare is not particularly interested in physical ailments of a literal kind” (Garber 104). Given the King’s very real fistula in *All’s Well*, and the death of King John, there certainly is interest in physical ailments of a literal kind. But Garber’s generalization reminds us that in Shakespeare, healers and disease *often* function metaphorically and are not always a means to seriously explore medicine *qua* medicine.

17 It is not entirely convincing that *MWW* is biased against the Royal College of Physicians. The character Doctor Caius, apart from being French, could be named after the prominent former president of the College and physician to Anne and Elizabeth. While the character does not establish himself medically in the play, we see his social status (including money and friends at court) from Mrs. Page’s endorsement of his proposal to marry Anne Page. Caius is a comic character, but not a caricature of his profession, any more than the pedantic Evans is a caricature of parsons.
Early works reflect a basic understanding of herbalism. Puck’s flower-based love potion is an herbal simple—one that acts more as lubricant for the love story in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (ca. 1595) than as a commentary on medicines (or magic). In *Romeo and Juliet* (1594), Friar Lawrence provides more insight into the mechanics of the sleeping draught he gives to Juliet: “This distilling liquor drink thou off / When presently through all thy veins shall run / A cold and drowsy humor” (4.1.94-96). The liquor will adjust Juliet’s humoral complexion, cooling her warm blood for the forty-two hours that it remains in her system. Friar Lawrence’s humoral understanding of medicine is further demonstrated upon discovering Romeo’s dead body, declaring “A greater power than we can contradict / Hath thwarted our intents” (5.3.153-54). Healing is the act of contradicting, in order to counterbalance, a closed humoral system.

The humoralism we experience in *King John* (1596) may be described as relentless. There are three main uses for humoralism in the play:

1. Representation of the humoral nation’s body politic
2. King John reading humoralism into others’ bodies
3. King John diagnosing his own humoral/political body

Pandulph uses the humoral model metaphorically to explore the current crisis of the humoral body politic:

> Before the curing of a strong disease,
> Even in the instant of repair and health,
> The fit is strongest. Evils that take leave,
> On their departure most of all show evil. (3.4.112-15)
This passage has nothing to do with understanding literal illness in a character, but rather uses the Hippocratic concept of crisis in order to understand relationships of political bodies. Only when things seem the absolute worst will there be recovery or death. The medical model is used as political diagnostic, identifying the moment of crisis for the ailing (imbalanced) body politic.

Earlier in the play, Chatillon describes unruly individuals causing political strife. They are symptomatic of the imbalance leading to the crisis, behaving as if they were themselves humors insistent upon creating and maintaining imbalance:

With them a bastard of the king’s deceased.
And all th’ unsettled humors of the land,
Rash, inconsiderate, fiery voluntaries,
With ladies’ faces and fierce dragons’ spleens. (2.1.65-68)

Through their actions, they themselves are overheating the complexion of the nation, all the while remaining individuals with their own imbalanced complexions. The brief use of physiognomy, “ladies’ faces,” suggests that for these men, the inner workings are so imbalanced as to have corrupted the outer appearance. Their “dragon’s spleens” hyperbolize the choleric imbalance through engaging visual imagery. What begins as mildly “unsettled” develops rapidly into the fire-producing organ of a mythological beast. A “fiery voluntaries”-cooling St. George seems in order.

John takes this image of the land itself as a body, inseparable from political considerations:
Nay, in the body of this fleshy land,
This kingdom, this confine of blood and breath,
Hostility and civil tumult reigns
Between my conscience and my cousin’s death. (4.2.245-48)

This land is now flesh and blood, a tumultuous body. Politically, the body healthy and diseased becomes a metaphorical (and literary) stomping ground for expressing the condition of the state. It also seems that, although King John ultimately dies from the same humoral imbalance now affecting the nation, at this moment the body of King and the body of nation are separate. This medical body politic is reflected in vernacular medical treatises, particularly those of London surgeon William Clowes (ca.1540-1604). In his three major works on syphilis, martial medicine (particularly gunshot wounds), and scrofula, Clowes addresses England as a national body and her people as both the source of her strength and the cause of her disease: there is no metonymy of Queen and country. The title page of his work on syphilis, *A Short and Profitable Treatise Touching the Cure of the Disease Called Morbus Gallicus by Unctions* (1579), boasts that it is printed “cum privilegio Regiae Maiestatis.” This is the only reference to the Queen. The Dedication is given to the Society of Barbers and Surgeons of London. It seems as though Clowes tastefully distances the Queen from the diseased, syphilitic body of England: “It is wonderfull to consider, how huge multitudes there be of such as be infected with it, and that dayly increase, to the great daunger of the commonwealth, and to the stayne of the whole nation” (Bi.v). Weakened bodies collectively create a weakened body of England, deficient in warfare, economics, and other areas necessary to compete for survival on an international scale. Certainly Elizabeth cannot be associated with the infected body of
the nation, and the “stayne” certainly must not apply to her. We can see how concepts of bodily and political disease begin to be expressed through more complicated dynamics than the king-as-country model. Adam Kitzes’ recent book-length study on melancholy explores the body-politic analogy in the period, arguing that “During the 1590s and 1600s, the analogy’s popularity rose dramatically, and as King James himself came to compare his own duties to a physician’s, it became one of the dominant terms in theoretical discussions of disorder and rebellion” (106-7).

We can see King John acting as a type of diagnostician for the body of the nation when he instructs Pandulph in how to politically treat the situation:

Now keep your holy word. Go meet the French,
And from his Holiness use all your power
To stop their marches ‘fore we are inflam’d.
Our discontented counties do revolt.
Our people quarrel with obedience,
Swearing allegiance and the love of soul
To stranger blood, to foreign royalty.
This inundation of mistemp’red humor
Rests by you only to be qualified.
Then pause not, for the present time’s so sick
That present med’cine must be minist’red,
Or overthrow incurable ensues. (5.1.5-16)

The marching French army is an inflammatory force, moving the nation’s humoral complexion to excessive warmth. The counties, contained within this closed system, react hydraulically. Ultimately, the imbalance reaches the individuals that comprise the
counties, the nation, resulting in allegiance to another—to “stranger blood,” mixing two bodies of state that ought to remain separate. Pandulph is the physician who must treat the “mistemp’red humor,” which is “by you only to be qualified.” The concept of present medicine to cure present time seems on the surface to suggest the Paracelsian approach of like curing like—in addition to the theory of local cures for local disease. However, the constant humoral model demonstrated in the rest of the speech, combined with the understanding of the crisis reaching “overthrow incurable,” suggests a more traditional, humoral approach.

King John credibly identifies and prescribes for the political body because he has practice in both humoral diagnostics and theory. He can read into the humoral body and discuss how the mechanism works:

Or if that surly spirit, melancholy,
Had bak’d thy blood and made it heavy, thick,
Which else runs tickling up and down the veins,
Making that idiot, Laughter, keep men’s eyes
And strain their cheeks to idle merriment—
A passion hateful to my purposes. (3.3.42-47)

He describes a closed system that has no humoral balance. Either the body is melancholy or sanguine: there is no middle ground, no health. The human subject presents passively in this model—the “surly spirit, melancholy,” and “that idiot, laughter” are the active agents and seem to wield all the control. The humors themselves act to thicken or dilute the blood, leaving the body to react as a passive machine.
John’s diagnostic skills are, most importantly, turned upon his own humoral and political body:

France, I am burn’d up with inflaming wrath,
A rage whose heat hath this condition,
That nothing can allay, nothing but blood,
The blood, and dearest-valued blood, of France. (3.1.340-43)

Blood, typically associated with the quality of heat, is paradoxically what the King requires to cool his inflaming wrath. Although the word *playful* seems an inappropriate descriptor for what the King is doing here, he is nonetheless playing with humoral medical practice. Traditional humoral treatment for his current condition is to bleed the patient. However, John prescribes the bleeding of *another* body in order to rebalance his own. France is used as bookends in this passage. Why begin and end here? He seems to be defining limits of the afflicted body, wherein there is wrath, rage, heat, blood, blood, and more blood.

This predicts the death of the King two acts later and, significantly, his constant need to be self-diagnosing during his ailment:

This fever that hath troubled me so long,
Lies heavy on me. O, my heart is sick! (5.3.3-4)

He describes not only the cause of his condition, but also the symptoms:

Aye me, this tyrant fever burns me up…
Weakness possesseth me, and I am faint. (5.3.14,17)
When others describe the King’s symptoms, we get a somewhat different story. Prince Henry claims that such radical imbalances are undetectable in those suffering from them: the crazy man never thinks that he is crazy. Henry also describes some type of hallucination or irrational speech by the King:

> O vanity of sickness! fierce extremes  
> In their continuance will not feel themselves.  
> Death, having prey’d upon the outward parts,  
> Leaves them invisible, and his siege is now  
> Against the mind, which he pricks and wounds  
> With many legions of strange fantasies,  
> Which in their throng and press to that last hold,  
> Confound themselves. (5.7.13-20)

We never see the siege against the mind, nor do we see the King suffering from legions of strange fantasies. Perhaps in the actual production of the play, there is some stage business of the King being attended to, ministered, restrained, or wandering while Henry speaks. As for speech, we will see below that King John does not fly off to delusional fantasy or incoherence, but to complex layers of coherent and consistent metaphor.

What is Henry really saying? Death has moved inward, consuming the King’s mind. But where do we see “legions of strange fantasies?” The audience is told by Henry of the King’s “idle comments” (5.7.4), but does not witness onstage hallucinating or rambling. The King remains lucid, using clear imagery to explain not only his dire circumstance, but also to describe and identify in an orderly fashion the hot mechanism of his poisoning and the extreme cold requisite to balance out such heat. Even Pembroke
understands and verifies the King’s logical suggestion for counterbalancing the excessive heat of the poison:

His Highness yet doth speak, and holds belief
That being brought into the open air,
It would allay the burning quality
Of that fell poison which assaileth him. (5.7.6-9)

King John, even in his moment of poisoned crisis, on the brink of death, is as rational about the mortality of kings as is the King in Richard II (1595):

For within the hollow crown
That rounds the mortal temples of a king
Keeps Death his court, and there the antic sits,
Scoffing his state and grinning at his pomp,
Allowing him a breath, a little scene,
To monarchize, be fear’d, and kill with looks,
Infusing him with self and vain conceit,
As if this flesh which walls about our life
Were brass impregnable; and humor’d thus
Comes at the last and with a little pin
Bores through his castle wall, and farewell king! (3.2.160-70)

While there is no shortage of kings speaking on death in Shakespeare, Richard’s memento mori covers in one sentence the vulnerability experienced by both the King in All’s Well and King John. It is an awareness of mortality with resistance instead of resignation. Richard replaces the real, physical ailments of fistula or poisoning with Death’s “little
pin.” The diminutive imagery and the ultimately vulnerable position of the King is explored by John:

KING. There is so hot a summer in my bosom
That all my bowels crumble up to dust.
I am a scribbled form, drawn with a pen
Upon a parchment, and against this fire
Do I shrink up.

HENRY. How fares your Majesty?

KING. Poison’d—ill fare! dead, forsook, cast off,
And none of you will bid the winter come
To thrust his icy fingers in my maw,
Nor let my kingdom’s rivers take their course
Through my burn’d bosom, nor entreat the north
To make his bleak winds kiss my parched lips
And comfort me with cold. I do not ask you much,
I beg cold comfort; and you are so strait
And so ingrateful, you deny me that.

HENRY. O, that there were some virtue in my tears,
That might relieve you!

JOHN. The salt in them is hot.
Within me is a hell, and there the poison
Is as a fiend confin’d to tyrannize
On unretrievable condemned blood. (5.7.30-48)

John is asking for humoral assistance: winter’s icy fingers, England’s cool rivers, and Boreas represent the cooling forces necessary to counteract the poison. Perhaps John
knows he is too far gone: we may read winter’s icy fingers, the nation’s rivers, and the
breath of north wind—all redirected into his body—as hyperbole of the extreme and
impossible quantity of coolness necessary to save him. If his body and the nation’s body
were one and the same, the rivers and winds would already be at work on him. “Cold
comfort” is John’s prescription, which cannot be administered. And why not? All the
imbalanced elements of his nation were political and therefore human. He calls upon
nature and the formal Aristotelian elements of wind and water.

In his dying words, the King describes to his half-brother Philip the Bastard his
approach toward death as a dissolution of the rigging in the ship that is his heart:

O Cousin, thou art come to set mine eye.
The tackle of my heart is crack’d and burn’d,
And all the shrouds wherewith my life should sail
Are turned to one thread, one little hair.
My heart hath one poor string to stay it by,
Which holds but till thy news be uttered,
And then all this thou seest is but a clod
And module of confounded royalty. (5.7.51-58)

To the very end, we see no evidence of what Henry implied was Death consuming the
King’s mind, or the presence of illusions. The King is lucid—so much so that he
illustrates in the passage above the very destruction of sails and ropes on his ship of life
(or, more consistent with his imagery, of his heart), reducing the entire rigging “to one
thread, one little hair.”
Is this transformation of the King alchemical? The King undergoes a nautical transubstantiation that may foreshadow Alonso’s aquatic transformations in *The Tempest* (1611). Alchemy is a useful metaphor, but ultimately proves itself not only superficial but deceptively immaterial in *King John*. Earlier in the play, King Philip used an explicitly alchemical metaphor:

To solemnize this day the glorious sun
Stays in his course and plays the alchymist,
Turning with splendor of his precious eye
The meager cloddy earth to glittering gold. (3.1.77-80)

The role of the sun as transmutational alchemist should bring to mind the lines from Sonnet 33:

Full many a glorious morning have I seen
Flatter the mountain tops with sovereign eye,
Kissing with golden face the meadows green,
Gilding pale streams with heavenly alchemy. (1-4)

The glorious sun, the glorious morning; the precious eye, the sovereign eye. The sun as alchemist works in Philip’s speech to transmute the “cloddy earth,” whereas the sonnet’s sun-alchemist works more superficially, only “gilding.” While it may at first seem that Philip’s alchemical language is more thoroughly engaged with the transmutational possibilities, Constance plays the same role as the sonnet’s clouds, blotting out the sun and proving the alchemical process to be an illusion:
You have beguil’d me with a counterfeit
Resembling majesty, which being touch’d, and tried,
Proves valueless. (3.1.99-101)

Ultimately, we cannot expect an alchemical transmutation of the King in this play. The “shroud” is both a sail and a death shroud; the clod is earth, dust, clay—not a perfected King experiencing climactic alchemical projection, but a mortal body reduced by a fever to ashes. Salisbury’s immediate reaction to the King’s death demonstrates this: “but now a King, now thus” (5.7.66). The King has finally undergone a true transformation: not one of climactic alchemical projection, but from living body to dead—from man to dust, from King to clay.

Certainly, this complex metaphor spoken by the King moments before his death is a contrast from the “strange fantasies” described by Henry. The King is demonstrably eloquent, if not topically coherent, in his final breath—perhaps to the point of reminding the audience of Bottom’s dragged-out death scene while enacting Pyramis. The King’s final words are not a Bottomy melodramatic cry for attention, but rather one of the clearest and most technically extended Shakespearean metaphors. Even if the depth of the nautical metaphor is distracting or forgettable to the audience, it is a much-needed attempt at snagging the imagination—or heartstrings—both of which were quite possibly exhausted by this point in the play, thanks to Arthur’s torture and death, and Arthur’s mother’s descent into madness. The metaphor is not satisfactorily alchemical, and is ultimately shipwrecked along with the King’s body on the shoals of humoralism.
There is no physician in *King John*, yet the king continually views the political and interpersonal relationships around him through a medically diagnostic lens.\(^{18}\) The only true ailment is the fever that takes his life at the end of the play, at the moment when he is at once patient and physician, acutely suffering and accurately diagnosing his own condition.

While *All’s Well* shows us no licensed physician yet shows an extreme disease, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* shows us a physician but no disease. As medical imagery is concerned, Doctor Caius is a non-starter: the character of Nym is of particular interest. A pickpocket groupie of Sir John Falstaff, spouting cryptic humoral phrases, Nym speaks only thirteen times in the play, and disappears completely after 2.1. Most of Nym’s lines seem throwaways—they are often sarcastic commentary or oblique response to some type of word or action, not themselves eliciting response: they tell us nothing of humoralism or of how to understand people or the world in a humoral model. Sometimes the word denotes a mood, sometimes it denotes funniness. He says the words often but only once has a moment of clarity. “My humor shall not cool. I will incense Page to deal with poison. I will possess him with yellowness, for the revolt of mine is dangerous. That is my true humor” (1.3.100-3). Nym’s final lines before leaving the stage and the play permanently in 2.1 shows his role as bizarre cryptic mouthpiece:

> And this is true; I like not the humor of lying. He hath wrong’d me in some humors. I should have borne the humor’d letter to her; but I have a

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\(^{18}\) Presumably, the monk/s who poisoned him at the Abbey dabbled in medicinal compounds, like Friar Lawrence.
sword, and it shall bite upon my necessity. He loves your wife. There’s
the short and the long. My name is Corporal Nym. I speak, and I avouch.
‘Tis true. My name is Nym, and Falstaff loves your wife. Adieu. I love
not the humor of bread and cheese, and there’s the humor of it. Adieu.

(2.1.128-37)

The phrase “My name is Nym” is almost a palindrome, and is certainly an anagram. Nym
defines himself as a joke, a play on words that is interesting only on the level of words
themselves and not in their meanings.

After this parting speech, Page responds “‘The humor of it,’ quoth ‘a! Here’s a
fellow frights English out of his wits” (2.1.138-39). It is not only the audience, but other
characters onstage who recognize the signifier’s lack of the signified. A mid-twentieth
century editor of Shakespeare’s works notes after Nym’s second speech that “Nym
misuses the word humor so grossly that it is not always possible to give the exact
meaning of his words” (Harrison 942 n.170). While his speech is almost entirely
gibberish, Nym is discriminatory in his subject matter—it centers always on
experimenting with the humors. He satirically demonstrates that discussion of the
humors is nonproductive and nonsensical: it seems that humoralism is no longer a
satisfactory explanatory tool for behaviors and personalities. Humoralism is a broken
tool, and Nym is surely Shakespeare’s answer to Chapman and Jonson’s new “humors”
comedies.

It has been widely noted that language itself breaks down quite often in Merry
Wives. The Welsh parson Hugh Evans is ridiculed by Falstaff as “one that makes fritters
of English” (5.5.143), becoming a stereotype of the cheese-eating Welshman who speaks ridiculously.19 The Host of the Garter suggests that Slender and Shallow disarm Evans and the French Dr. Caius: “Disarm them, and let them question. Let them keep their limbs whole and hack our English” (3.1.76-78). The destruction of the language by Evans goes hand-in-glove with the destruction of any coherent understanding of how basic humoralism functions:

Jeshu pless my soul! how full of chollors I am and trempling of mind! I shall be glad if he have deceiv’d me. How melancholies I am! I will knog his urinals about his knave’s costard when I have good opportunities for the ork. Pless my soul. (3.1.11-16)

The Welsh “accent” aside, it is clear that he is conflating extreme emotion with the concept of being melancholy. He is sincerely trying to describe his own complexion, but lumps all cholers together, labeling as melancholy what is more accurately a sanguine or choleric condition. Mistress Quickly does this as well, when describing Dr. Caius: “I am glad he is so quiet: if he had been thoroughly mov’d, you should have heard him so loud and so melancholy” (1.4.89-91). The described behavior does not match up with the descriptor. Shakespeare may be mocking the court’s fashionable melancholy by showing that rusticated Windsor citizens, too, can adopt the humor: they are playing at melancholy in a way that diminishes any meaning the humor may have originally had. One is reminded of college students earnestly describing an occurrence as “ironic” when they

19 The contemporary portrayal of Welshmen abusing the English language (or being entirely unintelligible) is revisited by John Donne in Ignatius His Conclave, discussed in Chapter Five below.
wish to describe something that is, actually, merely coincidental, surprising, embarassing, or unlucky.

English is not the only language that is broken in the play. One entire scene (which appears in the Folio but not the Quarto) is dedicated to Evans giving young William Page an impromptu Latin lesson. Mrs. Page and Mistress Quickly interject their observations on the Welshman’s pronunciations and William’s responses, turning what begins as a Latin lesson into listening to a young boy speaking obscenities—much to the relief and delight of the audience.

Much has been said about the innuendo, punning, and regional obscene idiom of the language in the latter part of the scene, but it might be worth looking at an earlier moment:

EVANS. What is lapis, William?
WILLIAM. A stone.
EVANS. And what is “a stone,” William?
WILLIAM. A pebble.
EVANS. No, it is lapis. I pray you remember in your prain.
WILLIAM. Lapis. (4.1.31-37)

Evans is following the Latin training model of translating from Latin into English and back into Latin. William misunderstands and provides the first translation and then a definition. Of all the nouns, all of the words in general, that would allow for this mildly amusing misunderstanding, the word is lapis. The philosopher’s stone, the purified and perfected material in the alchemical alembic (discussed above in chapter 1), would
certainly come to mind for the contemporary audience. It is not taken seriously as a concept or even as a word in this context: it is literally diminished to both a misunderstanding and a pebble. This is not on its own an incredibly exciting alchemical discovery, but we might consider that this is one of the words that the play is satirizing (albeit on a much smaller scale than Nym’s abuse of “humor”).

The other reference to “stone” in the play comes, interestingly, from the other foreigner, Dr. Caius. In describing the program of physical violence he intends to carry out against Hugh Evans, the Doctor promises “By gar, I will cut all his two stones; by gar, he shall not have a stone to throw at his dog” (1.4.111-13). Both the urological operation and the phrase cutting for the stone were familiar to Shakespeare’s audience. Owing to the extreme expedient of sticking knives into the genital area without the use of anesthetic, that practice was probably only second to uroscopy in the vulgar understanding of medical intervention. Of course, the medical procedure of cutting for the stone is to remove obstructed calcified bodies from the ureter or bladder, whereas Caius is talking about castration—“I will cut all his two stones.” Not only is this not a medical procedure, it is a change in the definition of materials; a change from a kidney stone to a testicle. This is a different lapis entirely and is, as shown above, degraded further in act 4. The passage then moves away even from this definition toward one that is simply a stone found on the ground. The potentially alchemical lapis becomes testicle becomes a pebble. The play continually satirizes the humors, leaving no room in the play for Galenic medicine: and now when stones are not taken seriously, Paracelsian medicine also has no room. Medicine is broken.
This happens earlier in the same scene. Dr. Caius is about to leave his house when he remembers something: “Dere is some simples in my closset dat I vill not for the varld I shall leave behind” (1.4.63-64). Of course, he intends to gather these medicinal simples. But the play and its insistence that language and medicine must be broken has replaced the medicinal simples with Slender’s servant, Peter Simple, who was hiding in the closet. It seems that whatever begins with the possibility of being medical, of providing an inroad to discovering how medicine might work in the play, the object is manipulated or transmuted from medical to general terminology through a lame pun.

In *Merry Wives*, Caius is a doctor in name, but not in action. The name itself is worth noting. The historical, English, John Caius repeatedly held the position of president of the Royal College of Physicians, and attended to Queen Elizabeth until he lost the position due to his suspected Catholicism. He was a prominent figure in sixteenth century English medicine, which Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, will attest to. Why the name is indubitably recycled by Shakespeare into a French character is beyond the scope of this study. What remains, then, if the doctor does no doctoring in the play? We must look at how he and his profession are understood by the others. It seems that Caius has established himself as a credible professional in the community. Mrs. Page chooses him as the best suitor for her daughter Anne owing to his success, financial stability, and friends at court. Shallow seems to take the doctor seriously, suggesting that the planned duel between Caius and Evans should not take place: “[Evans] is a curer of souls, and you a curer of bodies. If you should fight, you go against the hair of your professions” (2.3.39-41). Page calls him “Master Doctor Caius, the renowned French
physician” (3.1.60-61). The Host of the Garter, however, seems to flash in and out of manic phases of name-calling: “What says my Aesculapius? my Galien? my heart of elder?” (2.3.28-29); “Thou art a Castalion King Urinal!” (2.3.33) These labels seem directed at the idea of a physician, and not necessarily at Caius specifically, by naming the most famous authorities, alluding to urinoscopy, and naming a powerful emetic (heart of elder). The Host gets more specific to the French doctor with “A word, Monsieur Mockwater” (2.3.57). The French title of address is specific, but is not a required change from English to allow for alliteration. It seems, once again, that the play is more concerned with faulty language: the breakdown of communication parallels the severing of the essential sympathy that effects the medical cure.

The Host later responds to the concept of the doctor and the parson sharing a curative role: “Shall I lose my doctor? No, he gives me the potions and the motions. Shall I lose my parson? my priest? my Sir Hugh? No, he gives me the proverbs and the no-verbs. Give me thy hand, terrestrial; so. Give me thy hand, celestial; so. Boys of art, I have deceiv’d you both” (3.1.102-7). While the Host admits to his earlier rousing behavior, his justification for creating a peace from the feud is verbally and conceptually playful. The “potions and the motions” undoubtedly refers to the physician’s role in prescribing purgative and laxative tinctures, making for a fun combination with the parson’s “proverbs and no-verbs.” He continues to pull the Welsh parson and the French doctor closer together communally even while separating them conceptually with the contrast of “terrestrial” and “celestial.” Even though this continues to echo Shallow’s image of cure of souls and cure of bodies, we cannot be convinced of anyone’s
confidence that these two healers are capable of successfully performing their duties. These two foreigners are both faulty to a comedic level in their respective masteries of the English language, and commit the dual folly of firstly, arranging a duel, and secondly, not fighting it.

Interestingly enough, soon after the Host’s fits of name-calling is the one moment in the play where an humoral model is accurately executed. It is the Host himself, speaking to Caius, telling him to “sheathe thy impatience, throw cold water on thy choler” (2.3.84-85). He mocks the doctor with the glamour of Galen, then, fifty lines later, provides the only clearly Galenic prescription in the play.

Other characters have tried, as we have seen above, but mixed up or interchanged the properties or humors. Both of the Merry Wives themselves have even tried their hands at visual diagnosis:

MRS. PAGE. You look very ill.
MRS. FORD. Nay, I’ll ne’er believe that; I have to show to the contrary.
MRS. PAGE. Faith, but you do, in my mind.
MRS. FORD. Well—I do then; yet I say I could show you to the contrary.

(2.1.36-41)

Soon afterwards, Mrs. Ford takes a turn at playing failed diagnostician when speaking with her husband:

MRS. FORD. How now, sweet Frank, why art thou melancholy?
FORD. I melancholy? I am not melancholy. Get you home; go.

(2.1.150-51)
The words, the characters—the play itself—resists the possibility that medicine or medical language has a place. There is not room for, as Evans would say, “Hibocrates and Galen” (3.1.65).

We cannot overlook the fact that *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is a comedic vehicle for reprising the popular character Falstaff. In this very English play, we have seen most of the medical language (and the breakdown of language) happening through and around the Welshman and Frenchman. Of the aforementioned five occurrences of “Galen” in Shakespeare’s works, it is worth noting that Falstaff voices one of them in 2 *Henry IV*. Falstaff has received news from his Page that the doctor has inspected Falstaff’s urine. The Page reports the doctor “said, sir, the water itself was a good healthy water, but for the party that ow’d it, he might have moe diseases than he knew for” (1.2.3-5). He takes it in stride that all people try to jest with him, and is not surprised that the doctor behaves like all other men. Soon afterward, Falstaff is speaking with the Lord Chief Justice about the King’s recent ill-health:

**FALSTAFF.** This apoplexy, as I take it, is a kind of lethargy, and’t please your lordship, a kind of sleeping in the blood, a whoreson tingling.

**CHIEF JUSTICE.** What tell you me of it? Be it as it is.

**FALSTAFF.** It hath its original from much grief, from study and perturbation of the brain. I have read the cause of his effects in Galen, it is a kind of deafness.

**CHIEF JUSTICE.** I think you are fall’n into the disease, for you hear not what I say to you.

**FALSTAFF.** Very well, my lord, very well. Rather, and’t please you, it is the disease of not list’ning, the malady of
Falstaff *has read Galen*. Contrary to the other invocations of the Greek physician, Falstaff’s references are seriously analytical. He is familiar with traditional medical texts and his description of the laundry hamper escapade in *Merry Wives* uses language that suggests he is familiar with alchemical language as well. Falstaff is relating to Mr. Ford (who he knows at the moment as “Mr. Brook”) how he escaped from Mrs. Ford’s house right under the nose of her jealous husband. He describes the three separate deaths he underwent in a few moments: being frightened by the possibility of being discovered by a jealous husband, being crammed into the laundry basket, “and then to be stopp’d in like a strong distillation” when Mrs. Ford and her servants piled soiled laundry on top of him (3.5.112-13). The basket becomes an alembic, the dirty clothes become the stopper, and Falstaff becomes the putrefying matter within. He continues to relate the experience in alchemical imagery:

Think of that—a man of my kidney. Think of that—that am as subject to heat as butter; a man of continual dissolution and thaw. It was a miracle to scape suffocation. And in the height of this bath (when I was more than half stew’d in grease like a Dutch dish) to be thrown into the Thames, and cool’d, glowing-hot, in that surge, like a horse-shoe; think of that—hissing hot—think of that, Master Brook. (3.5.115-22)

In a play where medicine—and even language—is broken, we find an alchemical distillation. The play moves from formally trained physician to characters familiar with newer medical theory. This is echoed by Menius Agrippa in *Coriolanus*:

A letter for me! it gives me an estate of seven years' health, in which time I will make a lip at the physician. The most sovereign prescription in Galen is but empiricute, and, to this preservative, of no better report than a horse-drench. (2.1.114-18)
This passage tells us more about Agrippa’s excitement over the letter than it does about a serious discussion of Galen or medicine in general. Galen is used as the vehicle for an extended hyperbolic metaphor. However, we may infer that, in order for the hyperbole to carry any weight, Agrippa must be one who takes Galen seriously as a medical authority: the “most sovereign prescription in Galen” must carry the rhetorical strength of being the strongest type of medicine in order for the trope to work. The best that medicine has to offer is reduced to equine laxative compared to the effects that good news can have.

All of the examples so far demonstrate Shakespeare’s dissatisfaction with the current state of institutional medicine. The schools of “both Galen and Paracelsus” have failed in *All’s Well*, necessitating an alchemical healing of the sick King by an unlicensed, nontraditional female healer, Helena. The King is healed. King John is not a physician, but seems continually capable of reading his own humoral body: the sick King diagnoses himself and prescribes “cold comfort” to cure his fever. The prescription is buried in what sounds like metaphor to those around him, and is never applied. The King dies. While Caius seems to occupy a position of social and professional respect in *Merry Wives*, the play does not provide him with an instance of disease to prove himself. Instead, the Merry Wives take on the project of ridding their husbands (and the community) of horn-madness, the melancholy humor of jealousy. They do this through social rather than medical means. The Wives then take turns inaccurately diagnosing other characters, and it is up to Falstaff to explain his own experience in the laundry basket as an alchemical distillation.
Shakespeare is done with the humoral body. Nym demonstrates in just over a dozen lines how current physiology is best understood as verbal gibberish, with no real application to either true denotation or the body. Kent’s line to the King early in Lear proves that there is no room for established medical practice: the agency moves to the patient, with an overall sense of futility for hope of cure: “do, kill thy physician and the fee bestow / Upon the foul disease” (1.1.163-64). Marjorie Garber argues that this passage signals the moment where “The king’s action is a choice of sickness over health—as Lear’s subsequent madness will confirm” (Garber 103).

Generally dated to be composed contemporaneously with the tragedies owing to style, Timon of Athens (1607) also has obvious parallels to scenes from Lear when in railing from his hovel, and “Timon’s curses on Athens and on mankind are an echo of Coriolanus’s curse on Rome” (Harrison 1315). These strong thematic parallels, as well as the popularity of the misanthrope character on the dramatic stage during the first decade of the new century, can be further supported by medical imagery in the play.

Contrary to the alchemy that did not—as we see from the previous chapter—contribute toward a coherent theme of medical imagery, Timon’s imagery consistently projects a motif of diagnosis, plague, sickness, and contagion.

The language of morbidity, disease, and decay is consistent with Shakespeare’s later uses of pathology based on contagion and chemistry, rather than humoral imbalances. Humoralism still has a secondary place, of course, but its use feels more like a necessary nod to the fad of melancholy and the contemporary idiom of mood-dictating humors than the playwright’s analysis of a closed humoral system. Both the frequency
and intensity of morbific imagery increase in an inverse relationship with Timon’s healthy social standing. This relationship directly parallels the experience of King John discussed above. As King John’s political certainty decreases, so the rampant self-diagnostic, humoral, internal imbalance increases. As Timon falls, so references to external contagion and disease rise.

The first act of the play contains very little in the way of medical terminology, but is worth exploring to establish the inverse relationship between Timon’s perceived affluence and the use of such imagery. In the initial banquet scene, Timon upbraids the outspoken Apemantius:

Fie, th’art a churl. Ye have got a humor there

Does not become a man, ‘tis much to blame.

They say, my lords, “Ira furor brevis est.”

But yond man is ever angry. (1.2.26-29)

Timon thus publicly diagnoses Apemantius’s antisocial outbursts as resulting from a continual fit of madness. Timon swiftly passes over Apemantius, lending their exchange an air of badinage resulting in a gnomic Latinate cliché and not a serious medical discussion. Such a psychological use of “humor” at this point might best be understood as a quick reference to Jonson’s plays and to Chapman’s A Humorous Day’s Mirth. It is a theatrical shorthand method that sets Apemantius’s mood and behavior at odds with what Timon expects at the moment: Apemantius is out of line, and the contemporary audience quickly understands this use of “humor.”
This apparently disposable use of “humor” reappears in an aside where Flavius remarks on Timon’s excessive distribution of jewels following the masque: “More jewels yet! / There’s no crossing him in’s humor” (1.2.159-60). Now it is Timon who is guilty of temporary madness—mad prodigality—that is the root cause of his downfall and his similarly, only consistent personal quality or humor. Apemantius’s recent madness of misanthropy is his main consistent trait—one that is ultimately contagious and contracted by Timon. Where Apemantius falls to his humor by words, Timon’s dangerous humor shows through his prodigiously wasteful action.

After being denied money for Timon by Lucullus, Flaminius accuses him of being “Thou disease of a friend, and not himself!” (3.1.53) Lucullus, says Flaminius,

has my lord’s meat in him;
Why should it thrive and turn to nutriment,
When he is turn’d to poison?
O, may diseases only work upon’t!
And when he’s sick to death, let not that part of nature
Which my lord paid for, be of any power
To expel sickness, but prolong his hour! (3.1.57-63)

Flaminius creates a complex metaphysical trope that sounds like what we will see below in Donne’s work. Lucullus himself is poison, and therefore his body should not benefit from Timon’s food: only disease itself should grow. In the next line, we see that there is part of Lucullus that was created through Timon’s food—the body of Lucullus has benefitted, but will become “sick to death.” That part of him, is now cursed to prolong suffering and not to “expel sickness.” In this series of metaphors, Flaminius provides a
hylozoistic body that is an agent. It interacts with sickness that is an ens to be removed from the body, not an imbalance of qualities for which the body passively awaits readjustment.

It is the body, not the physician, which has the power to embrace or expel morbific invasion from the outside. Sempronius discusses Timon’s current situation literally as a social disease: “Must I be his last refuge? His friends, like physicians, / Thrive, give him over. Must I take the cure upon me?” (3.3.11-12) Unfaithful friends are like ineffectual physicians who continue with their lives (and even thrive) as the patient dies.

After failing to receive money from any of his fair-weather acquaintances—his “trencher friends”—Timon invites them to a banquet of covered dishes containing water. As Timon rails at them, his language provides the stage direction indicating the gathered guests are leaving: “What dost thou go? / Soft! Take thy physic first—thou too—and thou!” (3.6.99-100) Depending on how this is staged, he could be throwing the dishes, splashing water, gesturing obscenely, or possibly threatening physical abuse. But why is it their physic? What is it, and why do they need it? Perhaps Timon understands his own downfall not as symptomatic of his own social disease, but as symptomatic of the diseased male society around him. They are the disease that must be cured by removing them from the social body.

But it is Timon who is expelled, not all of the others. Timon’s rant against Athens from outside the city shows his awareness of the body of society that remains behind the
city walls and invokes further disease to infect it. His extended apostrophe to disease repeats the concept of infection having a source outside the body:

Plagues incident to men,
Your potent and infectious fevers heap
On Athens, ripe for stroke! Thou cold sciatica,
Cripple our senators, that their limbs may halt
As lamely as their manners! Lust, and liberty,
Creep in the minds and marrows of our youth,
That ‘gainst the stream of virtue they may strive,
And drown themselves in riot! Itches, blains,
Sow all th’ Athenian bosoms, and their crop
Be general leprosy! Breath, infect breath,
That their society (as their friendship) may
Be merely poison! Nothing I’ll bear from thee
But nakedness, thou detestable town! (4.1.21-33)

This catalogue expands Mercutio’s dying curse “on both your houses.” The orders Timon gives to the diseases can be seen in the rich verbs: heap, cripple, creep, sow, infect. The commands are coming from outside the city walls (and outside the bounds of society), giving orders for disease to likewise invade a body from without. Timon includes physical (sciatica) as well as moral infection. Lust and liberty infect the brains and bones, and there is a suggestion of passing leprosy to the newest generation through breastfeeding. Timon weaves together the physical and conceptual, especially in the breath that infects through disease as well as through faulty friendship and lies. Later, he
goes so far as to apostrophize the sun, calling for a toxic miasma to infect the sublunary sphere:

O blessed breeding sun, draw from the earth
Rotten humidity; below thy sister’s orb
Infect the air! Twinn’d brothers of one womb,
Whose procreation, residence, and birth
Scarce is dividant, touch them with several fortunes,
The greater scorns the lesser. Not nature
(To whom all sores lay siege) can bear great fortune
But by contempt of nature. (4.3.1-8)

Timon’s curse—entirely non-Galenic but astrologically Paracelsian—would make London playgoers squirm. The very recent 1592 and 1603 plague years brought accompanying rashes of publication on the plague which, like the hundreds of English and European treatises since the Black Death, often contained astrological explanations for the cause of outbreak (Kassell 101-2). (See also Thomas Lodge’s 1603 *Treatise of the Plague*). “Paracelsus stressed the interplay between man and the heavens and the creation of disease through imagined sin, describing plague as caused by God’s retribution, shot from the firmament” (Kassell 102, who also references Pagel 174-80). According to Paracelsus, plague could be attributed to specific substances, whether astral or not, invading the body from without and disrupting or blocking the spirits specific to the brain, heart, or liver” (Kassell 116). We can see that Timon’s version of the plague is decidedly Paracelsian in nature. The Servant in Timon’s house calls his former master “A dedicated beggar to the air, / With his disease of all-shunn’d poverty” (4.2.13-14). If
we are to believe the Servant, the disease is the combined effects of social ostracism and poverty. The latter, Timon soon cures thanks to the unpublished virtues of the earth.

As Timon digs in the earth, immediately before coming upon the cache of gold, “Destruction fang mankind! Earth, yield me roots! / Who seeks for better of thee, sauce his palate / With thy most operant poison!” (4.3.23-25) He curses the gold, saying it will make “the hoar leprosy adored” (36), and cause the widow “whom the spital house and ulcerous sores / Would cast the gorge at” to smell sweetly again (40-41). So while the astrological half of Timon’s approach is Paracelsian, he refuses to allow for the metallic “cure” of his own disease of poverty. This is not surprising, as the gold of this context is not an iatrochemical prescription, but rather physical specie used as currency: as such it has value only in the socio-economic exchange of gold for goods or services which, according to Timon, can only be morally destructive in their operation.

Timon sees the whore Phrynia as a biological weapon. He says to Alcibiades

TIMON. This fell whore of thine  
Hath in her more destruction than thy sword,  
For all her cherubin look.

PHRYNIA. Thy lips rot off!

TIMON. I will not kiss thee, then the rot returns  
To thine own lips again.  (4.3.62-66)

And Timon says to Timandra

Be a whore still. They love thee not that use thee;  
Give them diseases, leaving with thee their lust.
Make use of thy salt hours, season the slaves
For tubs and baths, bring down rose-cheek’d youth
To the tub-fast and the diet.  (4.3.84-88)

This is a bizarre combination of culinary seasoning and the sweating treatment for
venereal disease. Here is Timon’s last piece of advice to the whores, who say that they’ll
“do any thing for gold:”

Consumptions sow
In hollow bones of man, strike their sharp shins,
And mar men’s spurring. Crack the lawyer’s voice,
That he may never more false title plead,
Nor sound his quillets shrilly; hoar the flamen,
That scolds against the quality of flesh,
And not believes himself. Down with the nose,
Down with it flat; take the bridge quite away
Of him that, his particular to foresee,
Smells from the general weal. Make curl’d-pate ruffians bald,
And let the unscarr’d braggarts of the war
Derive some pain from you. Plague all,
That your activity may defeat and quell
The source of all erection. There’s more gold.
Do you damn others, and let this damn you,
And the ditches grave you all! (4.3.151-66)

Timon has thus found in Phrynia and Timandra the vehicles by which he can bring to
reality his curse of plague and disease upon Athens. They are self-destructing biological
weapons. “Timon enlists the prostitutes as secret agents of germ warfare,” which is
doubly significant in this context because “of all the epidemic diseases, the pox had
developed the worst reputation for being intentionally, surreptitiously spread, particularly
by women of loose morals” (Qualtiere 17). London surgeon William Clowes (ca.1540-
1604) published his 1579 vernacular work *A Short and Profitable Treatise Touching the
Cure of the Disease Called Morbus Gallico by Unctions*—a medical text designed for
readers explicitly outside the communities of learned medical professionals. Bruce
Boehrer, historian of syphilis, suggests that within the greater context of medical
publication in the surrounding decades, Clowes’ text is “newfangled” because it is
vernacular, explicitly addressed to the general reader, and comes without the
“cumbersome textual apparatus of medieval Scholastic medicine” (Boehrer 197). Clowes
repeatedly emphasizes the need to understand syphilis as a threat not just to individuals,
but to public health at large. The huge numbers of the infected move Clowes to shine
light on the doubly destructive nature of the disease: moral degeneration as well as a very
real threat to national security. Timon hopes the whores may undermine Athens from
within as Alcibiades besieges it like an external pestilence.

Why is *Timon* such a masculine play? The only female characters are the whores
Phrynia and Timandra. They are not developed as characters, but are types lugged onto
the stage so that Timon may say witty things about how they may use their bodies as
vehicles of biological warfare. It is possible that Timon’s address to the “common
mother,” just after Alcibiades leads away the whores, explains the misogyny of his curses
that echo Lear’s. The earth’s womb looks like an alternative to Paracelsian metaphors:
Shakespeare uses one or the other, but doesn’t combine them.
Prendergast’s discussion of women that are “predatory, cannibalistic, and promiscuous” embodying “an anxiety about the threat desiring women pose to male autonomy, subjectivity, and cultural authority,” while certainly an engaging exercise in Freudianism and fetishism, seems borderline perverse for a play that has six lines spoken by women, mute females in the act 1 masque, and no substantive female characters or references to actual contemporary female off-stage characters (215). The possibility that the play is somehow reflective of the first decade of the Jacobean court, with the isolation of the queen in her own residence and James’s generous (especially when contrasted with the final years of Elizabeth) bestowal of gifts on his attendant male courtiers, suggests a more intriguing link to historical reality. Of course, both—psycho-sexual and historical-parallel approaches—suffer from the fact that the play feels incomplete and largely unperformable as presented in the Folio.

Prendergast suggests, complicatedly, that “The play’s substitution of subjective women with inanimate gold along with its substitution of homosocial exchanges with the practice of hoarding and its displacement of dialogue with solipsistic invective erode possibilities for homosocial bonding” (Prendergast 221). It is difficult to decide if this interpretation is worth including in the present discussion as it requires use of Prendergast’s bizarre theory that the men of Timon’s court have replaced what is a typical oligarchic exchange of valuable women with the one-way exchange of money. It seems to introduce concepts specific to modern socio-political-literary theory but not to Timon of Athens. The theory becomes laughable when we apply it to Coriolanus—especially considering Prendergast’s unconvincing requirement that the main behavior of
courtiers is to exchange women with one another. The lack of women in the play, evidently, can be horribly misinterpreted.

In addition to attacking Athens at the ground level, as it were, Timon attributes to Alcibiades the power to inflict a malicious atmospheric miasma, commonly believed in the period to be caused by malicious astrological conjunctions. Timon tells Alcibiades to “Be as a planetary plague when Jove / Will o’er some high-vic’d city hang his poison / In the sick air. Let not thy sword skip one” (4.3.109-11). The cosmic miasma model of contagion was used by Ulrich von Hutten to explain the difficult situation of a new disease appearing with force in a world that ought to have been materially constant since creation. It is not unique that Timon fixates on sickness, but we must acknowledge that the particular epidemiology of the play consistently demands contagion of the individual, the social, and the municipal body from the outside. As Timon illustrates to Apemantus, once disease is present in and on one of these bodies, it is contagious as a physical ens that is easily transferred: “I’ll beat thee, but I should infect my hands” (4.3.364). There is no room for humoralism here: disease is external and moves back and forth regardless of any internal balance of qualities.

Timon even changes the conceptual use of what it means to catch a disease; instead of meaning to contract, it becomes to ensnare, entrap, or hunt: “I thank them, and would send them back the plague, / Could I but catch it for them” (5.1.137-38). Disease exists on its own, in the wild, almost to the extent that it could be caught in a trap and delivered by messenger.
Ultimately Timon introduces the image of death being the cure for the illness that is his life:

My long sickness
   Of health and living now begins to mend,
   And nothing brings me all things. Go, live still;
   Be Alcibiades your plague, you his,
   And last so long enough. (5.1.186-90)

He begins, at this moment, to sound a bit like the death-desiring Donne we will see in the next two chapters: death brings about the perfection of man. However, Timon is missing (for obvious reasons) the salvific half of the equation. Timon’s final words demonstrate a material completion of man’s works—one that is a morbid celebration of the physical grave where everything is silent and the lights go out. There is no salvation:

Lips, let sour words go by and language end!
What is amiss, plague and infection mend!
Graves only be men’s works, and death their gain.
Sun, hide thy beams, Timon hath done his reign. (5.1.220-23)

The final lines of the poem, spoken by Alcibiades, seem to curiously advocate an application of opposites in a medical metaphor: “Make war breed peace, make peace stint war, make each / Prescribe to other as each other’s leech. / Let our drums strike” (5.4.83-85). Yet the end result of each situation in the first line is peace: war ends with peace, and let peace stop war. It is confusing, then, that either personification should prescribe to the other. Wouldn’t Alcibiades then be suggesting that peace must be treated with
war—an idea that is contrary to the beginning of the sentence? Medicine, even in metaphor, has broken down and died at the end of the play.

Whereas in the earlier works, humoralism worked as a handy tool for diagnosis until it became overused and satirized, the newer concepts of external contagion are allowed to destroy, but not necessarily to heal in *Timon*. There are changes happening in the use of the medical metaphors, but we do not see a complete endorsement of the iatrochemical, Paracelsian worldview. Rather, there is the general feeling that one model is broken, the other is not quite ready: there is no true sense of accomplishment or progress—there is no optimism that medicine is capable of much at all. Helena’s healing of the sick King is anomalous, particularly because she is not a medical professional, she is a woman, and her cure is alchemical. It would be distracting and not at all feasible to introduce such a healer into the plays whenever cure were needed.

Asserting claims for Paracelsian healing without the presence of metals, or furthering Shakespeare’s concept of iatrochemistry without the presence of overt alchemy gets more complicated in a string of the later plays, namely *Pericles, Cymbeline, A Winter’s Tale*, and *The Tempest*. Some types of healing suggest progress, but, like Helena’s cure, they require characters with unique backgrounds and special knowledge: they are not simply of the schools of Galen or Paracelsus. Marina heals Pericles with music, and Cerimon\(^20\) heals Thaisa with what seems like a combination of natural magic (bordering on Paracelsian cosmography) and quasi-Ficinian music of the spheres.

\(^{20}\)Interestingly, Cerimon’s name lives on today in Cerimon Pharmaceuticals, a San Francisco biopharmaceutical development company.
Prospero and Cerimon have discovered Cordelia’s “unpublished virtues” that include music. Helena doesn’t use music, although her promise to the King is an incantation and he dances to prove his fully recovered health. Cymbeline shows effective distillation and also the death of the establishment doctor. *Winter’s Tale* revives the healing song and demonstrates a general alchemical awareness. Ariel’s song in *Tempest*, as discussed earlier, is highly alchemical—but the overall message is a lie.

Establishment physicians as agents of death and the concept of the humors as intellectual conceit were so heavily satirized on the stage that they were contaminated beyond repair as serious forces in the dramatic literature. King John spoke exactly what humoral imbalance he was suffering from and how it could be cured, but no one listened. Nym spoke such inconsequential gibberish about the humors that no one could listen. The humoral model of the body is irreparably broken both medically and verbally. While Shakespeare never goes so far as to explicitly endorse the alternative of chemical medicine, its basic precepts continue to function medically through Helena, and verbally through Timon’s curses and other moments of illumination. In a future project, it would be worthwhile to explore the possibility that Shakespeare’s position on healing may ultimately be termed “sympathist.” Certain scientific methods may be helpful at times, but the human body has complex sympathies with the earth and the heavens that can be accessed through incantation, music, natural magic, and other nontraditional, non-institutional, and seemingly non-medical means.
John Stubbs’ recent biography of John Donne continually explores the major shifts or changes that Donne chose to undergo throughout his personal and professional life in order to achieve his successes: he was constantly adapting to his circumstances. Stubbs even goes so far as to speculate had Donne survived to the Civil War, he would have refused to choose a side (460). The necessity for exploring the strengths (or weaknesses) of all sides of an issue is central to Donne’s unstoppable dualism. Mind and body are continually separated in both his prose and verse, and we see what T.S. Eliot characterized as “that playing upon an idea, arresting it and turning it about for examination” that was so “highly peculiar to Donne and his school” (111). Determined dualists, in their fascination with survival of some part of the intellect beyond the body, are very susceptible to apocalypse. Yet Donne never commits to apocalypse. He is in control constantly, even (and especially) during his complete masochistic domination: he directs his own rape in Holy Sonnet XIV, “Batter my heart,” providing step by step instructions for how God should overtake him. This perversely active passivity is not at all apocalyptic, and Donne maintains his characteristic possession of seeming contradiction: dead while alive, controlling when vulnerable. Whereas George Herbert wants to be saved, Donne wants to hover in the moments of ascension and descension, defining the reasons for damnation or salvation, with the hydraulic power to move up or
down based upon spiritual input of the moment. Donne has a continual need not to be
dead, but to be dying.

Just as *The Faerie Queene* is rife with the need for medical attention, Donne’s
writing is fraught with sickness of both body and soul. Donne is intensely aware that
science is a culture. His written work is not merely symptomatic of awareness of this
culture, but of repeated experiments in current thought arising from alchemy,
iatrochemistry, and the proliferation of medical publishing during the period. Donne
insists that scientific discovery must not be limited and it must be applied. What is
Donne doing with the body? Why are the bodies almost always tortured, suffering,
dying, dead, exhumed, expanding, contracting, or cut open for anatomy? What does
Donne think of both Galen and Paracelsus? Are they capable of reassembling or curing
this veritable hecatomb of Donne’s bodies?

While he may have converted from closet Catholic to a very public Dean of St.
Paul’s, while he may have grown from the traditional “Jack” of the racier love poems to
“Dr. Donne” of the pulpit, the human body in his writing remains constant: it is
(seemingly oxymoronically) constantly shifting. In 1943, Don Cameron Allen aptly
noted the difficulty of committing Donne to the camp of Galen or Paracelsus, stating that
“it is often impossible to pin him down, to decide on what side of a controversy he
stands. He varies in his medical beliefs as much as he varies in his search for orthodoxy
or in his search for a satisfactory planetary system. And while he varies he laughs”
(“John Donne’s Knowledge” 342). It is most interesting that Allen chooses to use
“beliefs” rather than “knowledge,” a slip that proves Allen’s close engagement with the
text and unavoidable conflation of historical Donne with the voice of the poetry. As far as we are capable of saying anything concrete about Donne’s beliefs, we may be limited to articles of his faith and our assumption that he believes himself a capable poet and a medium of paradox. It would be safe to assert that Donne does not strictly believe in medicine, because his constantly expanding knowledge of scientific discoveries does not reveal an assent to science. In the shifting newness of natural sciences, during this time of iconoclasm, discovery, and debate, Donne finds useful sources of metaphor and paradox. It is because he does not have belief, but he does have knowledge, that Donne can vary; it is also why he can laugh.

In an attempt to determine what he knew, we can scour what he wrote and also look at what Donne read. R.C. Bald tells us that we know for certain there were several works pertaining to alchemy in Donne’s personal library. Thomas Hayes also makes this claim—again, without telling us exactly which titles constitute these “several alchemical treatises” (61). The catalogue, in Keynes’s *Bibliography of Dr. John Donne* (258-79), is conspicuously lacking of any easily recognizable alchemical works readily available in the first two decades of the seventeenth century, such as Thomas Norton, Robert Fludd, Marsilio Ficino, George Ripley, Johann Mylius, Adreas Libavius, Oswald Croll, Albertus Magnus, or Michael Maier. However, as Keynes points out, there seem to be several large gaps in our current knowledge of Donne’s library. Firstly, we can see that a majority of the library’s 213 known texts were published before 1610, and were most likely used as research material for Donne’s *Pseudo-Martyr*. Secondly (and perhaps redundantly), there are very few works published after 1615. Thirdly, we do not see an impressive
number of Spanish-language or Spanish-subject texts that Donne alludes to in a 1623 letter to the Duke of Buckingham.

There are several problematic concerns with the methodology of the catalogue’s compilation. Many of the texts are identifiable as Donne’s only because they are bound with other texts signed by their owner. There are consistent pencil marks and reader’s notes (believed to be Donne’s) throughout nearly all of the works in the catalogue, but miniscule marginalia are hardly convincing criteria for introducing works unsigned by Donne into the catalogue. Thankfully, certain members of Donne’s library have been recovered throughout the twentieth century: even more thankfully, what catalogues we have do not speculate on what may have gone missing from Donne’s collection.

Among the certain entries in Donne’s library are at least two major players in alchemical publication: Paracelsus (book L135) and Ramon Lull (L113), the title pages of each bearing Donne’s signature and motto (Per Rachel ho seruito, & non per Lea). Linden notes that the association of the philosopher’s stone with Christ comes specifically from the thirteenth-century mystic and cabbalist Lull, who is influenced by even earlier writings (“Alchemy and Eschatology” 103). The presence of this text suggests a potential source for Donne’s image of Christ-as-lapis. Donne also owned Kepler’s Eclogae Chronicae (L107) as well as a work on optics (L152) and a copy of Johannes Mesua’s De Re Medica (L122). Other volumes of note include a work on Lycanthropy (L148) and at least six works on demonology and/or exorcism, suggesting that Donne’s view of nature—or at least ideas of nature that he was familiar with—included wider possibilities for the spiritual and material interactions between man and
nature and, for that matter, the connection between man and his own soul. Eluned Crawshaw is a proponent of Donne’s appreciation of the fluid borders of physics and metaphysics, arguing that “Alchemy did not draw hard and fast lines between the material and the spiritual,” a worldview we will experience repeatedly in Donne’s poetry (325). It matters deeply for both Donne’s purposes and those of the alchemical art, that “refinement is at once material and spiritual” (326). Crawshaw later demonstrates that Donne’s poetic imagery is in accord with both material and spiritual applications of alchemy, mirroring concepts from Asclepius, Nicholas Flamel, Marsilio Ficino, Agrippa, and especially Paracelsus.

Nearly three decades after Don Cameron Allen, Winfried Schleiner expressed clearly the position in which most scholars ultimately find themselves when trying to get Donne to commit to one side of the Galenic-Paracelsian debate: “In spite of the wealth of references to the theory of the humors in Donne’s imagery I must refrain from discussing the question of whether he believed in the orthodox theory or the Paracelsian” (Imagery 74). Again we see the troublesome use of belief, our response to which is not changed. The question should not be strictly whether the orthodox theory or the Paracelsian is believed: the question is not “Galen or Paracelsus?” The question is: “Why both Galen and Paracelsus?”

When we attempt to decipher any allegiance to one medical theory, we will see that Donne staunchly resists categorization. The quickest way to be wrong about Donne is to think you have found the answer. Allen notes that in a letter “to Sir Henry Wotton, Donne compares the purgation theories of Galen and Paracelsus to the advantage of the
latter” (“John Donne’s Knowledge” 324). Yet, as we will see below, Paracelsus is placed at the gates of hell in *Ignatius His Conclave* and the flesh-and-blood Donne undergoes Galenic purgation during his illness in *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*.

Donne constantly draws on images of anatomy, iatrochemistry, alchemical healing, and Christ as physician throughout his verse, prose, letters, and even “in the sermons, where Donne is unhampered by the requirements of rhyme and meter, he unwinds his medical knowledge to the delight of the hypochondriacs of his parish” (Allen “John Donne’s Knowledge” 323). Allen notes the categorical thoroughness of Donne’s uses of medicine:

> We could almost establish a dictionary of medical terms based on Donne’s writings because they are studded with words like ague, anatomy, antidote, apoplexy, balm, chirurgery, disease, dissect, fever, gangrene, gout, hydropsy, lethargy, palsy, physic, plaster, purge, and others that are most sparingly used by even the sicklier poets of Donne’s age. (322)

A quarter of a century later in *The Imagery of John Donne’s Sermons*, Winfried Schleiner disagrees, arguing that “The mere presence of such words as anatomy, antidote, dissect, fever, gangrene, physic, plaster, and purge, and other medical imagery does not justify the conclusion that Donne took a special interest in medicine as a science” (81). Rather, “in the field of imagery in which sin is seen as sickness, words like gangrene, plaster, fever, have their figurative predecessors in Augustine’s putria, emplastrum, febris” (81). It would be foolish not to acknowledge Donne’s debt to the rich store of patristic writing on sin as a disease of the soul, but it would be just as foolish to assert that Donne directly
models his own thought on precedence, or that he does not work creatively with his materials. Not only the presence, but the sheer volume of medical terminology in great profusion and repetition justifies the conclusion that Donne took a special interest in medicine as a culture, an intellectual pursuit, and a well for drawing deeply his own complex studies of dualism. Schleiner does not allow for the possibility that Donne is in fact sometimes engaging with science qua science. We must also consider what is different from Augustine. Donne is not merely a medical exegete divorced from the world: writing twelve centuries later, he derives his knowledge from many outbreaks of the plague, the discovery of both a new world and new diseases, scientific study of anatomy, claims of the continental empirics, alchemists, and the Galenic-Paracelsian debate. Galenism may have remained largely unchanged (though certainly more widespread) since Augustine, but Donne’s contemporaries had been dealing with iatrochemical theories for decades, and would continue to do so long after Donne was a statue in St. Paul’s. Medical imagery for Augustine and Donne is the same only within such generic terms as sickness, plaster, gangrene, and fever.

But the mechanisms behind fever, transmission of disease, and understanding of the physical body provoked wild contention among Donne’s contemporaries. It is noteworthy when Donne chooses a chemical image over a humoral image: the tenor may be identical (sin is a disease, sin is death, Christ is the ultimate physician), but Donne has more options for selecting dynamic curative/morbific vehicles for his imagery. As Kenneth Keele simply states, “Donne’s poetry arose from a general awareness of the significance of vast new worlds of fact in both global and human anatomy” (148). The
poet “was possessed of a large hoard of information that might either come from reading, from conversing with physicians, or from the common knowledge of his age” (Allen, “John Donne’s Knowledge” 338), and Donne himself acknowledges his textual relationship with medicine, rather notably in “The Will,” where “to him for whom the passing bell next tolls, / I give my physic books” (lines 37-38). Ironic and borderline inappropriate, this characteristically Donne couplet suggests duality while showing the actual poet’s possession of medical texts. Richard Sugg asserts the significance of Donne singling out in his actual will what should be done with the skeleton picture hanging in the hall; a rare item to mention in a document that is otherwise rather vague in its descriptions of possessions and household objects (34). As for conversation, “it may well be that Donne’s precise, if limited, knowledge of physiology” was influenced by his stepfather, president of the Royal College of Physicians Dr. John Syminges (Hughes 14).

In the picture of the skeleton and the physic books, we see visual and written medical texts that Donne associates with death. Of course Donne must take this even further in the poetry, exploring anatomy in depth using his own dead-yet-living body as a dynamic cadaverous instructional text.

In the opening lines of “The Legacie” we glimpse Donne’s need to remain continually in the moment of dying, “When I dyed last, and, Deare, I dye / As often as from thee I goe,” introducing what will total seven first person pronouns and three instances of death in the first stanza. If it weren’t so earnest, it might remind us of Bottom the Weaver’s histrionic death as Pyramis. The last line of the stanza shows the conceit of the poem: while dead, he will still play the role of both “Mine owne executor
and Legacie.” The following lines, comprising the majority of the 24-line poem, demonstrate the frantic me-ness of Donne’s death and pseudo-autopsy:

I heard mee say, Tell her anon,
That my selfe, (that is you, not I,)
Did kill me, and when I felt mee dye,
I bid mee send my heart, when I was gone,
But I alas could there finde none,
When I had ripp’d me, and search’d where hearts did lye;
It kill’d mee againe, that I who still was true,
In life, in my last Will should cozen you.

Yet I found something like a heart,
But colours it, and corners had,
It was not good, it was not bad,
It was intire to none, and few had part.
As good as could be made by art
It seem’d. (Lines 9-22)

In addition to executing his own estate (of which he himself is the main property), this Jack-of-all-trades performs his own interpretive autopsy. This is ultimately the most Paracelsian of autopsies, as Paracelsus believed that a truly accurate anatomy required the use of a living body (Gordon 601). Looking inside a corpse, one cannot necessarily understand how the parts work together in motion, or the processes of the body. While Donne claims to be dead, he most certainly is not. It may be more accurate to define the action of “The Legacie” as a vivisection—a practice we will see again in “The Relic.” In his Songs and Sonnets, this is Donne’s first example of how he intends to use human
anatomy to inform his poetic work. It is his most vague and unsatisfying example of anatomy—perhaps because it is introductory. He is, in this poem, a faulty human specimen: the heart itself is either not there, or is something unexpected, “something like a heart.” The object discovered in his chest cavity has colors and corners, and is reminiscent of a crafted artifact, shifting the focus away from the idea of an anatomical heart and onto the processes of litigation and its occasion.

Kate Gartner Frost’s study of numerology in Donne’s *Devotions* argues that the number 24 has specific significance as a number of completion: there are 24 hours in a day, and the number suggests cyclical wholeness. We will see below how the 23 sections of the *Devotions* are an intentional frustration of the number 24. In the “Legacie,” which Frost does not discuss, it may be worth noting the 24 lines of the three-stanza poem. There is completion, not in being surprised by the absence of a heart in his chest, but through dying, executing his own estate, performing his own anatomy, and explaining to his own satisfaction what the cardiac anomalies mean. Indeed, even in cutting open his own body, Donne refuses to lose structure of the poem. At the very center of the poem, line 13 begins with the “But” where he fails in finding his heart. The first half sets the scene, the turn at line 13 signals a change, and the second half teaches his audience and his lover why he found what he did.

Donne’s poem finds an eerie precedent in the eleventh-century monk John of Fécamp, whose *Libellus* implored Christ to “Write your will and your saving love on the
tablets of my heart” (as in Fulton 164). Rachel Fulton points out that the medieval John’s source material is most likely Proverbs 3:3\textsuperscript{21} and 2 Corinthians 3:3\textsuperscript{22}.

Donne’s next post-mortem autopsy occurs in “The Dampe,” a poem not often discussed, perhaps due to its bizarre concatenation of imagery. There are quite a few developments from the solipsistic “Legacie,” where it seems even the lover is simply a tool or foil for the experiment, if not an afterthought. In “The Dampe,” we see more of a traditional anatomical theater. Medical professionals cannot understand his cause of death, and so it is up to Donne’s friends to perform (demand?) the anatomy:

When I am dead, and Doctors know not why,
And my friends curiositie
Will have me cut up to survay each part,
When they shall finde your Picture in my heart,
You thinke a sodaine dampe of love
Will through all their senses move,
And worke on them as mee, and so preferre
Your murder, to the name of Massacre. (Lines 1-8)

At this point, Donne’s dead body is fascinating not only to himself, but (in his imagination) to his friends as well. Perhaps these are friends and not medical students, because they would appreciate the emotional context of the departed, and also because it would be morbidly fascinating to attend: anatomy has what one scholar has termed a

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\item \textsuperscript{21} “Let not mercy and truth forsake thee: bind them about thy neck; write them upon the table of thine heart.”
\item \textsuperscript{22} “Forasmuch as ye are manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ ministered by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tablets of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart.”
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“special novelty” during Donne’s lifetime (Sugg 13). In addition, the medical professionals are stumped while they undertake cutting up the body for “curiositie” and not cold medical education; they are still somehow qualified to “survay each part” and be able to recognize anomalies. Of course, finding the lover’s “Picture” in his heart would be noteworthy. Is there dangerous Catholocism (as seen above in Fécamp) in Donne’s fascination with supernatural imprints on the heart? A visual image imprinted on the heart might well remind the reader of medieval hagiography:

Even after death the bodies of saintly women were discovered to have been controlled and marked in strange ways. Intestines and stomachs were found to be empty, hearts were discovered to be etched with the signs of Christ….Clare of Montefalco’s spiritual sisters came to believe so intensely that Christ had planted his cross in her heart that at her death in 1308 they threw themselves upon her body, tore out her heart, and found incised upon it the insignia of the Passion. (Bynum 211)

Donne gets dangerously close to Catholic dogma when he seems to echo Bishop Gerard I (1013-1048): “The crucifix, in Gerard’s view, demands of the viewer more than memory, more than love; it demands that the viewer recognize in himself or herself the debt incurred by Christ’s Passion” (Fulton 87). However, it may be in the anatomical tradition of discovering the physical condition of the heart and noting anomalies that Donne finds most fascinating, and just happens to be recorded more faithfully in the accounts of anatomized Catholic saints.
The anatomical outliers are also continually present in medical literature. Ambroise Paré mentions early sixteenth century Florentine physician Antonius Benivenius who discovered in a post-mortem anatomy of a thief that “the heart was found to be completely covered with body hair” (64). In addition, Paré cites Parisian Jacques Hollier, who, in one female patient, “found in the substance of the heart two rather large stones” (52). It would seem that while medical discoveries were happy to report on any bizarre natural discovery, Donne and the Catholics prefer representative signs and images.

Just as shocking, though overshadowed by the “Picture in my heart,” is the contagion that arises from the physical heart and overwhelms everyone present at the anatomy. The heart will release “a sodaine dampe of love” that “Will through all their senses move,” resulting in a massacre rather than a single murder. The method of contagion is bizarre and not at all clear. Is it the infection of the friends through an external ens, or is it a Galenic destabilizing of their humors? The image of a “dampe of love” suggests a miasmatic, atmospheric matter, rising like a fog in the operating theater. But it also might indicate a humoral shift toward wet and cold—the opposite, we should notice, from the typical heat and dryness experienced by the lovestruck. The damp “will through all their senses move,” showing the motion contained in the body and not demonstrating an external penetration by a contagion. Either way, it’s fatal.

Holy Sonnet XIII revives the trope of an image imprinted on the heart, when the poet asks his soul to “Marke in my heart, O Soule, where thou dost dewll, / The picture of Christ crucified” (lines 2-3). By the end of his poetic production, it seems as though
Donne’s heart has become a coffee shop bulletin board, or a railcar palimpsest of spraypainted tags. “Just as the emperor’s image on his coins marked them as payment owed in taxes to the emperor (Matthew 22:20-21), so Christ’s image inscribed on the parchment of the heart marks everyone who gazes upon a crucifix as indebted to Christ for his or her salvation” (Fulton 87). He must die multiple times, and he repeatedly insists on multiple cardiac impressions. These are not revisions or alterations of a particular image, just as he is never revived between his sequential deaths. Each iteration, whether sickness, death, or anatomy, deserves to occur several times. But rather than treating each occasion as if it were its own cinematic outtake, Donne represents each scene with its own variation through Songs and Sonnets.

Perhaps superior to Donne’s fascination with the heart is the main subject of his divine poem, “The Crosse,” where he asks “Since Christ embrac’d the Crosse it selfe, dare I / His image, th’image of his Crosse deny?” (lines 1-2). Through metonymy the cross becomes Christ and is seen in flying birds, ships’ masts, and the intersecting meridians and parallels of the map.

Material Crosses then, good physic bee,
But yet spirituall have chief dignity.
These for extracted chimique medicine serve,
And cure much better, and as well preserve;
Then are you your own physicke, or need none,
When Still’d, or purg’d by tribulation.
For when that Crosse ungrudg’d, unto you stickes,
Then are you to your selfe, a Crucifixe. (Lines 25-32)
Donne essentially establishes a comparison between material and spiritual crosses, and Paracelsian and Galenic medicine. All of these provide physic for the ailing, but there is certainly a hierarchy. The “extracted chimique medicine,” a Paracelsian iatrochemical treatment, is treated as a superior approach to disease through its association with spiritual crosses: they “cure much better, and as well preserve.” Donne has earlier stated that he can become a material cross by outstretching his arms: but by adhering a spiritual cross to his soul, he can become his “own physicke, or need none.” A dualistic model of the poet emerges, where soul is capable of healing the body. This is not a Galenic rebalancing of spirituality, and Galenism has no place in this poem: the source of the cure is outside the physical self. It is not enough to form the body into the shape of the cross, but rather a spiritual cross comes from the outside and “stickes,” transforming the body and soul, combining them in a rare moment of collapsed dualism, into “a Crucifixe.” At this moment, container and the contained are one.

Yet Donne cannot resist poring over other anatomical considerations, especially the heart:

And crosse thy heart: for that in man alone
Points downewards, and hath palpitation.
Crosse those dejections, when it downeward tends,
And when it to forbidden heights pretends. (Lines 51-54)

Half abattoir, half metaphor, this heart is more than a symbol: it is anatomically correct. The colors and corners of “The Legacie” are gone, replaced by something more Vesalian, asymmetrical, palpating, and realistic. Physicality is overturned immediately, however, as
Donne instructs how making the sign of the cross can create a boundary or fence, blocking excessive spiritual downward or upward movement. The sign of the cross over the heart prevents movement into “dejections” or “forbidden heights,” a type of soul-balancing pacemaker.

The poem moves ahead and upwards to the head, reestablishing a more clinical anatomy which is again spiritualized:

And as the braine through bony walls doth vent
By sutures, which a Crosses forme present,
So when thy braine works, ere thou utter it,
Cross and correct concupiscence of witt. (Lines 55-58)

We can imagine an illustrated anatomy open on Donne’s desk—or, perhaps, the anatomically correct picture of a human skeleton hanging in his hall. Richard Sugg suggests that Donne’s graphic description of bodily decay in a sermon (3:105) “makes it clear that he is seeing these things as he speaks” (33). This moment of observation is more than a reflection on mortality, a Hamletic reminiscence or Richard II’s pin-wielding death puncturing the head: Donne is describing the sutures of the skull. Crosses are formed near the temples where the coronal suture meets the squamosal sutures. The coronal suture itself runs temple to temple, forming another cross (though more of a capital T than lowercase t) with the saggital suture. Physical crosses on the skull afford Donne the image of a brain venting and being filtered through the spiritually corrective figure of the cross.
Richard Sugg recently explored how the “anatomical revolution of the European continent” impacted English thought and literature in the period. For texts that are primarily not medical in subject but nonetheless use anatomy as the model or metaphor for their organization or exploration, Sugg uses the genre “the literary anatomy,” which he defines as “the desire to claim knowledge by fully, precisely, unsparingly piercing and labeling all [the subject’s] depths and intricacies” (2,3). Viewed in this light, we can understand that the *First Anniversary: An Anatomie of the World* hyperbolizes itself nearly out of the genre. Although the poem expresses the global shifts resulting from Elizabeth Drury’s death, it is entirely nondidactic: we learn nothing about the actual person (whom he never met).

Donne’s fascination with the anatomical trope reaches a crescendo in *The First Anniversary*, “An Anatomie of the World.” The concept is not just a label of the poetic exercise, but an introduction to the methodical exploratory nature of the poem, as suggested by the subtitle: “Wherein, By occasion of the untimely death of Mistris Elizabeth Drury, the frailty and the decay of this whole World is represented.” Thus the world itself is offered up as anatomical cadaver, which the poet will cut open and pry apart in order to see exactly how the world had functioned—and why it ceased to do so. Donne’s explanation for educational potential of anatomies (echoed in other writings) is the viewpoint consistent with modern gross anatomy laboratories: the living benefit and increase their knowledge through another’s death: “Well dy’d the World, that we might live to see / This world of wit, in his Anatomie” (lines 1-2). The role of the survivor is not to revel in his survival, but to learn from it and teach it forward: “This new world
may be safer, being told / The dangers and diseases of the old” (lines 87-88), suggesting an atypical attitude of beneficial accumulation of knowledge through anatomy. This seems to be flirting with the idea of progress.

Of course, the poetic images are not tightly focused only on the anatomical process as a metaphor for exploring the inevitable decay and downward spiral into confusion. Donne alludes to alchemy, astronomy, astrology, humoralism, chemical medicine, Kepler, magnetism, navigation, geometry, and even whaling, to illustrate through all means possible an environment (both macro and microcosmic) in constant stress and flux.

The world is continually changing: “So did the world from the first houre decay” (line 200), and therefore whatever we thought we knew about the world changes daily—especially considering the recent explosion of scientific explorations:

And new Philosophy calls all in doubt,  
The Element of fire is quite put out;  
The sun is lost, and th’earth, and no man’s wit  
Can well direct him where to look for it. (Lines 205-9)

The Italian physician, egomaniac, and autobiographer Girolamo Cardano wrote in The Book of My Life (1575) that he had, in fact, put out the element of fire. In discussing his most significant contributions to knowledge through his books, he claims that “In philosophy I withdrew fire from the number of the elements and showed all things were essentially cold” (Cardano 188). Whether or not Cardano is Donne’s original source for the extinguished element of fire, there are many contemporary models for the geometries
of the cosmos. The world is no longer a single object in a simple geocentric model: “Tis all in peeces, all cohaerence gone” (line 213). The model of the perfectly-shaped heavenly spheres with their circular motions is undone, as men

finde out so many Eccentrique parts,
Such divers down-right lines, such overthwarts,
As disproportion that pure forme: It teares
The Firmament in eight and forty sheires,
And in these Constallations then arise
New stares, and old doe vanish from our eyes. (Lines 255-60)

These changes are happening in the heavens and happening to others, not to Donne. He himself is a passive, but unchanged, observer. The firmament and familiar constellations are changed, but Donne’s couplets keep rolling along.

However, when the gaze shifts from the macrocosm to the microcosm, Donne is indeed involved. The pronouns demonstrate that he is not unique or alone, but grouped with others as being affected by the newness: “With new diseases on our selves we warre, / And with new Physicke, a worse Engin farre” (lines 159-60). Donne later casts Paracelsus as a denizen of Hell for being a medical innovator in Ignatius. This is the kind of progress made in medicine:

There is no health; Physitians say that wee,
At best, enjoy but a neutralitie.
And can there bee worse sicknesse, then to know
That we are never well, nor can be so? (Lines 91-94)
Health, as a medical condition or state of the body, is now nonexistent. If we can have only neutrality, then we need the best practitioner available to separate the negative from the neutral. Thus, Elizabeth Drury is cast as a spiritual alchemist in the *First Anniversary*:

Shee in whom virtue was so much refin’d,
That for Allay unto so pure a minde
She tooke the weaker Sex; shee that could drive
The poysnonous tincture, and the staine of Eve,
Out of her thoughts, and deeds; and purifie
All, by a true religious Alchymie.  (Lines 177-82)

The last three words seem at first paradoxical, until we recall Donne’s occasional use of Christ as the philosopher’s stone. Then, however, the last three words seem blasphemous. Is Donne claiming that Elizabeth Drury is capable of erasing not only sin, but Original Sin? And not just from womankind, but “All?” Elizabeth weakens her pure virtue with the stain of Eve in order to erase the stain of Eve. Rather than a spagyric separation of pure from dross, we see the soul of a young Miss Drury choosing to mix her purity with baser matter in a reversal of the alchemical goal. Does this religious alchemist achieve her climactic projection? Was it through her death that the projection reached unto “All,” transmuting them into untainted humanity?

It seems that the religious alchemy does not, in fact, come to fruition. We see that Elizabeth is one “Who, though she could not transubstantiate / All states to gold, yet gilded every state” (lines 417-18). Taken in the context of Donne’s larger attitude toward chrysopoetic, exoteric alchemy, such a gilding could be misconstrued as an insult: the
outward appearances of states were improved, but the original content remained the same. Only superficial results were achieved.

The above passages from the *First Anniversary* also recall the “Nativitie,” which is the third of the sonnet cycle entitled “La Corona,” in which Jesus uses the Marian womb as a place in which to weaken himself, to lower his powers until he is more human. Elizabeth Drury has somehow chosen to be a woman so that she might correct original sin—act as a lapsarian lapis, and separate the sin from the holy in all female blood. Donne’s alchemical healing of mankind has, in this context, taken a particular salvific, sin-erasing, quasi-heretical, and Paracelsian turn. This extreme show of supernatural hyperbole defies the imagination to exceed it—a nearly impossible task when considering Donne never met the poem’s subject.

The truly outrageous nature of this passage, that a child’s death is a (paradoxical) alchemical purification of not just women but all of the stain of original sin, places Elizabeth Drury in the role of philosopher’s stone that can project backwards into the Old Testament in a way that Jesus never does. Donne would never really go so far. This demonstrates the break of identity that Donne often exhibits in his more passionate poetry: no matter the subject, it comes back to Donne as wordsmith in control of the identities of his subjects as well as their perceived influences. That the “true religious Alchymie” is corrected later into a gilding image re-establishes Donne as parent and designer of a fantastic geometry of images—the ubiquitous reflection of himself that is present always: looking into the lover’s eye, and seeing a reflection of himself.
Always returning to the concept of the performative anatomy, Donne points out five specific lessons that we may learn from *The First Anniversary*’s combined alchemical/anatomical exercise. Each lesson is signaled by the line “Shee, shee is dead; shee’s dead” (lines 183, 237, 325, 369, 427), which, once we know this, he says, we can know “how poore a trifling thing man is” (184), “how lame a cripple this world is” (238), “how ugly a monster this world is” (326), “how wan a Ghost this our world is” (370), and “how drie a Cinder this world is” (428). Such are the five things we learn from Elizabeth’s death. These, in turn, are always followed by the Anatomical lesson, “And learn’st thus much by our Anatomie,” (lines 185, 239, 327, 371, and 429). The lessons, in respective order, are such:

1. The heart being perish’d, no part can free. (Line 186)

Regardless of how pure her mind, which drew to itself an alloy of Original Sin, the physical heart is very much of the mortal sphere. While Donne can fly off to hyperbole, he does not entirely forget the occasion of his poem.

2. That this worlds general sickenesse doth not lie

   In any humour, or one certain part;
   But as thou sawest it rotten at the heart,
   Thou seest a Hectique feaver hath got hold
   Of the whole substance, not to be contrould,
   And that thou hast but one way, not t’admit
   The worlds infection, to be none of it. (Lines 240-46)
The sickness is not a Galenic imbalance of humors: the entire body is infected at once. It is a sort of spiritual Ebola, or hemorrhagic fever of the soul. Infection is inevitable and strikes first at the heart: the only way to avoid it is to be dead.

3. That here is nothing to enamour thee:
   And that, not only faults in inward parts,
   Corruptions in our brains, or in our hearts,
   Poisoning the fountains, whence our actions spring,
   Endanger us: but that if every thing
   Be not done fitly and in proportion,
   To satisfie wise, and good lookers on, 23
   (Since most men be such as most thinke they bee)
   They’re loathsome too, by this Deformitee. (Lines 328-36)

Donne has shifted from the pure mind, the abstraction of the locus of thought, to the physical organ: the brain itself (like the heart) is now a poisoned fountain.

4. That it should more affright, then pleasure thee. (Line 372)

5. That ‘tis in vaine to dew, or mollifie
   It with thy tears, or sweat, or blood: nothing
   Is worth our travaile, griefe, or perishing,
   But those rich joyes, which did possesse her heart,
   Of which she’s now partaker, and a part. (Lines 430-34)

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23 This line creates the audience/voyeuristic element of the anatomical theater, as seen above in “The Legacie” and “The Dampe.” The whole exercise in this case is undertaken to improve the status of the anatomist and to educate/entertain the audience.
Is the final line a pun? By partaking in the anatomy, she has been taken apart? Yes. Her separation from earth has caused separation in micro/macrocosmic correspondence. Astrological medicine is no longer possible: the very relationship of the microcosm to the macrocosm, the very things that held correspondences between the above and the below, have disappeared. As above, no longer as below:

What Artist now dares boast that he can bring
Heaven hither, or constellate any thing,
So as the influence of those stares may bee
Imprison’d in an Hearbe, or Charme, or Tree,
And doe by touch, all which those stars could doe?
The art is lost, and correspondence too. (Lines 391-96)

This dramatic, hyperbolic, and ultimately rhetorical loss illustrates Donne’s perennial fascination with the relationship of the microcosm to the macrocosm: “The experience of Paracelsus led him to base his medical philosophy on the popular doctrine of the sympathies and antipathies existing between the microcosm and the macrocosm, a theory with which Donne was also infatuated” (Allen, “John Donne’s Knowledge” 325). It is important for the poet to see the entire world in the human body, and the body in the world, as introduced in the second stanza of Songs and Sonnets, in “The Good-morrow:”

For love, all love of other sights controules,
And makes one little roome, an every where.
Let sea-discoverers to new worlds have gone,
Let Maps to other, worlds on worlds have showne,
Let us possesse one world, each hath one, and is one. (Lines 10-14)
This selection from the aubade provides a contraction from macrocosm to microcosm in two stages. The first stage is contracting the world down to the bedroom, a conceit repeated soon after in “The Sunne Rising.” After allowing discoverers and cartographers free reign to explore and record what they will outside of the bedroom, the second stage is reminding the audience that the room is the world, and each person within it is a world. The microcosm and the macrocosm have been expanded from and collapsed into each person.

Just as in a true medical anatomy, the Anatomy of the World ends necessarily due to the inescapable claim of physical corruption: the body of the poem is rotting:

But as in cutting up a man that’s dead,  
The body will not last out, to have read  
On every part, and therefore men direct  
Their speech to parts, that are of most effect;  
So the worlds carcasse would not last, if I  
Were punctuall in this Anatomy;  
Nor smels it well to hearers, if one tell  
Them their disease, who faine would think they’re well. (Lines 435-42)

It has been suggested that by “ending ‘An Anatomy’ when the corpse begins to stink too heavily, the poet reveals that his final aim is not to reproduce the killing odor described by Paracelsian pathology” (Fletcher 17). On one hand, this may be taking the odor of decay too far. The problem is that “Nor smels it well,” not that it is releasing a killer miasma. On the other hand, the smell, if it were combined simply with the names of the ailments being suffered by the anatomical audience, would be enough to sicken them.
This is consistent with the Paracelsian belief that most “physical changes had psychic origins” (Fletcher 2). Donne makes it clear that the anatomy being performed is not Elizabeth Drury’s body, but the body of the poem. Through the poetic act of anatomizing Elizabeth’s purity, the very process of anatomy has become the anatomical subject.

The “Sunne Rising” treats the human body on the scale of the macrocosm: it becomes larger than sunbeams: “I could eclipse and cloud them with a winke” (line 13). Directly following “The Undertaking” in the 1633 printing, this poem provides the most straightforward demonstration of an attitude toward the practice of transmutational exoteric alchemy, supporting Linden’s thesis of physical alchemy’s dismissal as an object of untruth and ridicule:

> She’is all States, and all Princes, I,
> Nothing else is.
> Princes doe but play us; compar’d to this,
> All honor’s mimique; All wealth alchemie. (Lines 21-24)

There is no social or monetary value: the poet and his subject are the only genuine objects. These lines follow the wonderfully metaphysical depiction of the shrinking and contraction of the entire world, “both the India’s of spice and Myne,” and all “Kings,” into the bed that is the dramatic location of the poem. This contraction, the pulling together of the macrocosm of the map into the microcosm of the bed, is not only possible, it is given the impetus of truth. Earlier in the poem, Love has conquered other manmade concepts: “Love, all alike, no season knows, nor clime, / Nor hours, days, moneths, which are the rags of time” (lines 9-10). Both comparisons are matter-of-fact and do not
dwell defensively: Love is more real than our definition of how time passes, and is
certainly greater than honor and wealth. And since the world has contracted into the two
lovers, the earthly “Princes doe but play us.” Just as play-acting is an outward and
insubstantial (pretend) demonstration of true leadership, mimic and alchemy are false
representations of honor and wealth.

In reading lines 16-18 of “The Sunne Rising,” Anthony Low argues that the
female body is itself a mine to be dug into, with treasures to be removed, and that
“Eastern spices and American gold mines represent the unimaginable new splendors of
richness and beauty, which Donne appropriates to his mistress” (9). What Low ignores
or overlooks entirely is the poem’s immediate development of the contraction of the
macrocosm of the world into the microcosm of the bedroom: the significance of the East
and West Indies is not metallurgical but rather geographical, demonstrating that the two
opposite sides of the earth are pulled together into one very limited space. The mistress-
mine contains the true wealth, while the “alchemie” in this instance is the pejorative noun
denoting a “metallic composition imitating gold” (OED 3) or even “glittering dross”
(OED 4). Such definitions might give us pause in thinking back on Elizabeth Drury’s
gilding of the states, but it is unfair to suggest that Donne had anything but praise in mind
during the First Anniversary. Specifically, the “alchemie” in “The Sunne Rising” is used
as metonymy for counterfeit gold historically produced by the art’s exoteric practitioners:
the true wealth is esoteric, consisting in the metaphysical contraction of the globe into the
bedroom.
Donne’s shrinking of the world has also given him a Ficinian power over the sun itself as he gives it directions on how to behave: “Shine here to us, and thou art every where; / This bed thy center is, these walls, thy sphere” (lines 29-30). The Donnecentric bedroom becomes an Elizabethan British Empire, upon which the sun never sets. To his rhetorical question from the fourth line, “Must to thy motions lovers seasons run?” the music of Donne’s microcosmic sphere answers a resounding “No.” The reshaping of the world is paid for not with false gold, but the fact that all value is contained within the lovers.

Alchemy is not the subject of the poem or even the line, and it would be unfairly distracting to claim otherwise. Line 24 exists to illuminate by comparison that which is true (the collapse and contraction of the entire physical world into the bed), and that which is subjectively perceived as socially powerful (honor and wealth): the line is itself a poetic argument. It will suffice for our purposes to recognize that the relationship of honor : mimic :: wealth : alchemy, the analogue “honor” targets “wealth.” Mimic and alchemy paired together demonstrate superficiality: in Donne’s argument, both of these are only hollow, outward demonstrations of concepts that have themselves been conquered by the truth of the macrocosmic collapse into the microcosm.

“The Sunne Rising” introduces us to what, in the ever-shifting and slippery practice of trying to find Donne’s actual opinions on science or medicine, remains a constant: exoteric, transmutational alchemy is not possible. Of course, we must avoid the intentional fallacy and not pretend to know Donne’s true beliefs. It is nonetheless significant that Donne continues to use alchemical and medical imagery in his poems:
one need not believe in alchemy to recognize the vast potential of spagyric, morbific, conjugal, and ressurrective relationships that the art provides. The microcosm is still expanded onto the grand scale of the macrocosm. However, after the alchemical reference, the macrocosm contracts to the scale of the microcosm:

Thou sunne art half as happy’as wee,
In that the world’s contracted thus;
Thine age askes ease, and since thy duties bee
To warme the world, that’s done in warming us.
Shine here to us, and thou art every where;
This bed thy center is, these walls, thy sphære. (Lines 25-30)

The sun is old, so it seems the poet is doing it a favor by decreasing its workload: a smaller world is easier to warm. Donne’s fascination with expansion and contraction is more complex than the metaphysical conceit taught to college freshmen reading Donne for the first time. Donne wanted to explore the entire world without leaving a room’s four walls, and in doing so was thinking about divinity and prophecy, not simply mental exercise. Isaiah asks “Who hath measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, and meted out heaven with the span, and comprehended the dust of the earth in a measure, and weighed the mountains in scales, and the hills in a balance?” (Isaiah 40:12) In translating this question in different contexts, Donne concurrently holds Creation and the very existence of man in his mind without flying off to Apocalyptic conclusions. All individuals will die, but not as one person, and never all at once.

How is it that a man who fixates on death, nearly to the point of fetishism, avoids arriving at apocalyptic conclusions? He tells us that “I am a little world made cunningly”
(Holy Sonnet V line 1), and constantly insists on the direct relationship of the macrocosm to the microcosm. If Donne can die, won’t he take the rest of us down with the ship? Perhaps it is the constant newness, the real expansion and discovery in the physical macrocosm, that prevents Donne from having any confidence that he can end it all. He calls on the astronomers, who continually find new stars, and explorers, who discover new lands. Donne is engaging with the vast expansion of the world and the universe that happens through these discoveries, these examples of increase and change in what was once thought a physical existence static since Creation. Even in a verse letter to the Countess of Bedford, he notes that “We’ve have added to the world Virginia, ‘and sent / Two new starres lately to the firmament” (lines 67-68). As the world expands through discovery, so can the individual expand, as seen in “The Triple Foole,” when “I which was two fooles, do so grow three” (line 21). Each characteristic does not add to the original personality—he is not foolish in three ways, but rather expands to an additional entire fool for each occurrence.

Through this (albeit brief) introduction to Donne’s adherence to the macrocosmic/microcosmic relationship, combined with his fascination of anatomy, we see a very Paracelsian combination unique to Donne. Paracelsus scholar Andrew Weeks argues that what Paracelsus “calls the anatomy of a body, a thing, or a process, is an intuited configuration relating it to the correspondence of microcosm and macrocosm” (Weeks, “Introduction” 26). We can know about the body by conceptualizing the world, and we can understand the world by studying the body.
This is not unique to Donne or Paracelsus, but is an integral part of both men’s writings. Sixteenth-century medical writing is rife with macro/microcosmic language. One of the richer examples can be found in French surgeon Ambroise Paré’s *On Monsters and Marvels* (1573), wherein he clearly illustrates how we see the relationship of man to world:

Just as in the big world (i.e., the macrocosm) there are two great lights, to wit, the sun and the moon, so there are in the human body two eyes which illuminate it, which (body) is called the microcosm or small portrait of the big world, abridged. Which (microcosm) is composed of four elements, as is the big world in which winds, thunder, earthquakes, rain, dew, vapors, exhalations, hail, eclipses, floods, sterility, fertility, stones, mountains, fruits, and several diverse species of animals occur. (53-54)

We have seen an eclipse above in “The Sunne Rising,” and will experience rain, dew, vapors, and floods in later poems. Paré’s brief inclusion of animals is soon expanded, when he notes that “frogs, toads, snakes, lizards, and harpies” can all be found in the human body or be expelled from it (56), often going into great written detail accompanied by illustrations. Lest we overlook the passage, Paré reminds us that “in apostemas one finds very strange bodies, such as stones, chalk, gravel, coal, snail shells, blades of wheat or grass hay, horns, hair, and other things, together with several and diverse animals, both living and dead” (60). These are the direct result of a very fertile (and disturbingly creative) Nature attempting to reflect the macrocosm in the microcosm. These are not metaphorical frogs and snakes, but actual physical matter and creatures
found and identified as such by medical professionals during the sixteenth century, some of which Paré witnessed firsthand, the remainder of which he is careful to provide witnesses or citation for. For Paré, just like Paracelsus, gave more weight to observation and reflection than to traditional medical authority for its own sake.

In a verse letter “To the Countesse of Bedford,” Donne includes these discoveries of strange objects found during anatomies:

First seeds of every creature are in us,
What ere the world hath bad, or pretious,
Mans body can produce, hence hath it beene
That stones, wormes, frogges, and snakes in man are seene:
But who ere saw, though nature can worke soe,
That pearle, or gold, or corne in man did grow? (Lines 61-66)  

Is his question sarcastic, or merely rhetorical? Perhaps it is simply honest. If the larger world is represented so faithfully in the smaller one, why are all of the material representatives dull or repulsive? Why has no one had a pearl removed from their body, or grain harvested from them? Donne soon admits that “these are riddles” (line 81).

While the world presents the vicious, the virtuous also has a place. These two qualities are represented in a glaringly Paracelsian relationship of homeopathic application of likes to likes, rather than a Galenic rebalancing:

Some asperation
Of vice becomes well some complexion.

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24 Don Cameron Allen says, vaguely, about this passage, that “Paracelsus may have had something to do with Donne’s remarks about the natural objects that are found naturally in man” (“John Donne” 337).
Statesmen purge vice with vice, and may corrode
The bad with bad, a spider with a toad:
For so, ill thralls not them, but they tame ill
And make her do much good against her will,
But in your Commonwealth, or world in you,
Vice hath no office, or good worke to doe.
Take then no vitius purge, but be content
With cordiall virtue, your knowne nourishment. (Lines 81-90)

For those who are vicious, they are fed with more vice and thus remain who they are.
However, the little world (or “Commonwealth”) of the Countess of Bedford has no place for “bad” or “ill.” Only “cordiall virtue” will nourish her virtuous heart, in addition to allowing for a play on actual medicinal cordials.

The existence of vice and virtue, good and bad, ill and well, do not limit Donne to a world of two columns with a strong boundary down the middle. There is a line, certainly, but a line that can be—and is meant to be—crossed. The spiritual and physical materials of both the macrocosm and microcosm can be altered through processes that often rely on alchemy as a metaphorical (or literal) catalyst.

Donne’s uses of alchemical imagery have been convincingly explored by Edgar Hill Duncan in the earlier twentieth century, and more recently by Stanton Linden.25 Joseph Mazzeo, Kate Gartner Frost, Charles Webster, Lyndy Abraham, and others have largely agreed that Donne was conversant in alchemy enough to provide visual metaphors for corruption, purification, and resurrection—especially as these concepts pertain to the

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25 The next passage of discussion is adapted from my preliminary written exam.
soul. Closely related to alchemical imagery, and largely overlooked, are Donne’s uses of chemical medicine. Iatrochemical images and tropes often appear in proximity to the more famous alchemical figures, but carry their own rhetorical functions apart from their spagyric counterparts. Donne uses the language of newer chemical medicine to amplify and define relationships even when he satirizes chrysopoetic alchemy and presents the reader with a pre-Copernican universe.

In “Loves Growth,” Donne shows that he can “scarce believe my love to be so pure” (line 1) that it survived through the seasons, an arguable parallel to the Paracelsian philosophy wherein longevity depends on purity.26 As with all of Donne, we should expect there to be complications—in this case, expressed through love as created medicine:

But if this medicine, love, which cures all sorrow
With more, not onely bee no quintessence,
But Mixt of all stuffes, paining soule, or sense,
And of the Sunne his working vigor borrow,
Love’s not so pure, and abstract, as they use
To say, which have no Mistresse but their Muse,
But as all else, being elemented too,
Love sometimes would contemplate, sometimes do. (Lines 7-14)

To cure sorrow with more is curing like with like, a decidedly Paracelsian approach. A Galenist would cure sorrow with joy in order to correct the imbalance, but alas, for

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26 Or upon the correct chemical proportions in mixture, as in “The Good Morrow:” “What ever dyes, was not mixt equally” (line 19).
Donne, joy seems never to be a part of love. We have seen in an earlier chapter how Shakespeare’s sonnets demonstrate both approaches; healing like with like, and healing with application of opposites. Shakespeare seems content with using either model, whichever seems appropriate to the occasion, while Donne is more consistently Paracelsian. This is probably not through a dogmatic loyalty to Paracelsus, but rather an attraction to the seeming paradox of using a cause as a cure, a sickness as its own solution. But we see that love is “no quintessence” or pure remedy that will correct ailments immediately and directly, but rather “mixt of all stuffes:” pharmaceutically, it is a compound, not a simple (and certainly not the elixir vitae)—and the mixture does not seem to contain correct proportion for healing. The love-medicine is not a quintessence, a pure panacea, but a mixture of other elements: it is more jambalaya than gazpacho. These chunks can still be identified and separated from the whole, thus appearing either as thought or as action. Those who have only rational experience with love, “no Mistresse but their Muse,” think love is pure: the poet, however, has experienced love and his empirical conclusion is that love is “elemented” or made up of several materials, and is dependant upon the Sun (continuing the poem’s parallel trope of growing grass). Curing “all sorrow / with more” agrees with the iatrochemical approach of curing like with like, but also provides the rich possibility of Galenism. If we read “more” as a playful reference to Ann More, Donne’s wife, we might argue that the poem provides a veiled love note: sorrow can be cured by my wife. Love is not self-sufficient and not pure, as the poet once “thought it was” (line 2), but contains the duality found in all natural materials in “contemplate” and “do,” the passive and the active. This poem is most convincingly
understood as a contemplation rather than a plan of action: the paradoxical wit presents an abstraction of healing and not a collection of Love’s elements to be used practically.

While Donne is using conceptual imagery consistent with discussion of chemical medicines, he asserts his preference not just for the most recent scientific developments or discussions, but those structures that will provide the vision of symmetry, balance, and centrality that the contemplation of the beloved requires. The Ptolemaic “so many spheres, but one heaven make, / For, they are all concentrique unto thee” (lines 23-24) expresses the abstract significance of his subject in a way that Copernican heliocentrism, epicycles within orbits, and elliptical orbits simply cannot provide. The heliocentric yet only twice-bilaterally symmetrical geometry or the concept of planetary epicycles required to explain the apparent retrograde motion of Mars as viewed from earth is simply not very poetic. The ellipse and its relationships of the major axis, the minor axis, the vertex, and the co-vertex to one another and to each of the two foci may be appealing mathematically, but have no place in the bedroom during the morning after. This is why you put the love object at the center; the center of a circle, the center of a sphere. The empirical and the rational both have their place, depending upon what conceptual images they have to offer poetically.

In “Loves Exchange,” we see “this face” of the lover capable of causing great change in the physical world—a motif strongly repeated through “The Good Morrow,” and “The Sunne Rising,”—but without the corporeal destruction of “The Broken Heart” and “The Legacie,” or the carpe pudendum triumphalism of “The Flea” or “Confined Love.” Reminding us of the medicine Lafew describes in All’s Well That Ends Well, the
face of “Love’s Exchange” can cause dramatic physical change including resurrection of the dead:

This face, which wereso’er it comes,  
Can call vow’d men from cloisters, dead from tombes,  
And melt both Poles at once, and store  
Deserts with cities, and make more  
Mynes in the earth, then Quarries were before.  
For this, Love is enrage’d with mee,  
Yet kills not. If I must example bee  
To future Rebells; If the’unborne  
Must learne, by my being cut up, and torne:  
Kill, and dissect me, Love; for this  
Torture against thine owne end is,  
Rack’t carcasses make ill Anatomies. (Lines 31-42)

The face is alchemical. The face is medicinal. The face is a catalyst for moving between the microcosm and the macrocosm, ending with the need to study undamaged specimens to understand the two. Donne submits his body, as seen in previous poems, as an educational anatomical specimen for future students. He even engages the contemporary practice of saving people from torture or even remitting a death sentence if they agreed to be anatomized. Ambroise Paré describes the case of a man facing execution who agrees to the ultimate in anatomical study: vivisection. The man survived, recovered, was compensated, and freed (Paré 64). Why the creation of more mines would be included in such a catalogue of perception-altering phenomena is mysterious until we combine it with the final lines of the poem, accepting the entire presentation as a collection of parts that
must work together. Donne is demonstrating an awareness of the need to look *into* the earth and to look *into* the body as two necessary parts of the empirical medical project. The macrocosm and the microcosm are both opened up for exploration, and are associated with the possibilities of discovery—or, in the case of the “rack’t” carcass, the frustration of exploring within a corrupt environment.

The seemingly unobtrusive image of the mining seen above in “Love’s Exchange” is revisited in the first two lines of “Loves Alchymie:” “Some that have deeper digg’d loves Myne then I, / Say, where his centrique happinesse doth lie.” Donne draws on a directly Paracelsian concept of the necessity of “systematically and minutely studying the diversity of things” in order to reveal “the true extent of the variety of diseases, living organisms, or minerals…The chemist could not expect the mountains to come to him; he must visit them and there study the metallurgical and chemical methods of the workmen” (Webster *From Paracelsus* 55). Where the mine was in the previous poem a physical manifestation of macrocosm contrasted with digging in the human body, the mine now becomes a metaphor for the process of love. To learn about love is directly parallel to learning about mining: you must go to the source and ask the most experienced diggers. This is the same respect for experience that benefitted Helena in her negotiations with the King in *All’s Well That Ends Well*: the alchemical medicine Dr. She uses was, for her father Gerard de Narbon, “The dearest issue of his practice / And of his old experience the only darling” (2.1.109-10). While perhaps not an admission of an overall sense of progress in the accumulation of knowledge in Donne’s poem, there is nevertheless respect for experience.
The overt use of the word “alchemie” in the title of the poem would suggest a skeptical conception of the exoteric chrysopoetic art for Donne’s contemporaries. Donne again uses alchemy as a vehicle and not as the ultimate object of discussion: “Whether the alchemists and miners discover and bring back all the wealth of the Indies or merely expose themselves as impostors, still Donne refuses to cease his metaphorical digging and exploring” (Low 9). However, the poet’s continued veiled references to the equipment, materials, processes, or stock images of alchemy often signal sympathetic and symbiotic relations between spiritual and personal development and struggle (in the poems) and the concepts of esoteric alchemy.

Once we learn how to create more mines and how to perform anatomy on the body, we need to find the heart, gem, or ore of happiness within it—to apply the knowledge gained through exercise. Familiarity with Donne’s poetry illuminates the reader instantly to the fact that there is no true happiness in love: love is a painful, destructive force that causes inevitable suffering. Yet the search must go on through “Loves Alchymie.” It is the condition of being in love over time that continually digs deeper into the mine,

I have lov’d, and got, and told,
But should I love, get, tell, till I were old,
I should not find that hidden mysterie;
Oh, ‘tis imposture all. (Lines 3-6)

No matter how strenuous and lengthy his labor at the mine of love, he remains skeptical that he will ever “find that hidden mysterie.” Unveiling the mystery, as discussed in
earlier chapters and demonstrated by George Ripley’s *Compound of Alchemy*, is a standard alchemical trope for discovering the secret of the art after long and arduous study and application.\(^{27}\) The sixth line demonstrates Stanton Linden’s theory that exoteric alchemy was, for Donne and his contemporaries, an impossibility. Donne and Shakespeare both like to make dramatic play with “imposture,” a word that points directly to the King’s skepticism and subsequent interrogative interview in evaluating Helena’s suitability for the curative task.

It is in the second half of this first stanza where Donne has made the decision to continue not with the primary image of digging in love’s mine, but the secondary: he develops what he means by the “hidden mysterie” that is “imposture all:”

> Just as no chymique yet th’Elixar got,  
> But glorifies his pregnant pot,  
> If by the way to him befall  
> Some odoriferous thing, or medicinall,  
> So, lovers dreame a rich and long delight,  
> But get a winter-seeming summers night. (Lines 7-12)

The tenor of the alchemical comparison is failure resulting in inadvertent success; echoing the modern perception that alchemy categorically failed at producing the Elixir, but contributed to the growth of scientific discovery. Visual representations of the alchemical process are rife with the image of the alembic as womb, the “pregnant pot.” Of course, Donne’s combination of alliteration and use of the common (pejorative?)

\(^{27}\) Labora, labora, labora, ora et invenies.
“pot” rather than a more technical term (such as *vyalls* in “Twicknam Garden” or the limbec) serve to make small of the process. It seems just as likely that, in the event of anything other than utter failure, the result of the chymique’s experiment will be foul smelling as it could be medicinal. That Donne even bothered to address the concept that alchemical pursuits could benefit iatrochemistry (understood as a positive result) demonstrates that Love is as impossible as transmutation. But in the pursuit of the ultimate goal, one may inadvertently produce medicine.

This is exactly the type of medicine seen in *All’s Well That Ends Well*. Helena’s medicine was alchemical but not chrysopoetic: it cured, but did not create gold; it put her in a position to have access to Bertram, but did not directly produce love. The key to winning Bertram was preserving the sick King—projecting the alchemical medicine upon him in secret to perfect his health through killing and evicting the infirm from his body/alembic. The perfected King then (twice) joined Bertram to Helena. Lovers thus become alchemists: they search for the mystery, and “dreame a rich and long delight” that is the equivalent of the unobtainable Elixir Vitae. That which the lovers truly achieve is the “winter-seeming summers night.”

The second stanza seems to divorce itself entirely from the alchemical image of the first. Donne demonstrates here a contemptuous view of the Platonic lover:

That loving wretch that swears,

‘Tis not the bodies that marry, but the minds,

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28 This has resonance with Chaucer’s alchemy as seen in the Canon’s “erthen pot” (“Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale” line 761).
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Which he in her Angelique finds,
Would sweare as justly, that he heares,
In that days rude hoarse minstralsey, the sphare. (Lines18-22)

The Platonic lover grossly misidentifies the love object as a conceptual and not physical manifestation. The lover is not pathetic for believing in the music of the spheres (á la Ficino), but rather for listening in the wrong place and in the wrong context. Physical, sensory materials must not be conflated with ideals. Donne’s dualism will not allow it, and neither will his poem. The container is always separate from the thing contained: “Hope not for minde in women; at their best / Sweetnesse and wit, they are but Mummy, possest” (lines 23-24). This hearkens back to calling “dead from tombes” in “Love’s Exchange,” while taking from the chemical references above the obvious contemporary association of medicinal mumia. Hartmann’s glossary explains Mumia as it is used in the writings of Paracelsus:

The essence of life contained in some vehicle….Parts of the human, animal, or vegetable bodies, if separated from the organism, retain their vital power and their specific action for a while, as is proved by the transplantation of skin, by vaccination, poisoning by infection from corpses, dissection wounds, infection from ulcers, &c….Blood, excrements, &c., may contain vitality for a while after having been removed from the organism, and there may still exist some sympathy between such substances and the vitality of the organism; and by acting upon the former, the latter may be affected. (Hartmann 37)
Lingering Paracelsian sympathies haunt the image of woman as mumia. Woman is reduced to a physical piece with an aura of the ideal but no true part of it. The true vitality, the angelic element, the pure love, may taint the physical being, but the being is not a full container: it is “possest,” a condition we will see in Donne’s ecstatic works as easily exorcised.

Thus digging in love’s mine for happiness is paralleled with the alchemists’ pursuit of the elixir vitae—an exoteric alchemical goal that never ends successfully. Stanton Linden (among others) has demonstrated in his alchemical reading of “Loves Alchymie” that Donne is making gentle satirical use of chrysopoetic alchemy—it creates the mechanism of reality necessarily falling short of unrealistic expectations. The lovers’ dream, just like that of the “chymique,” does not come true.

If we look at the other side of the pregnant pot, there is more than gentle alchemical satire happening in this poem. Although the chymique seems absurd when he “glorifies his pregnant pot” for being full of an accident, the accident itself is not satirized. Donne is certainly acknowledging chemically prepared perfumes and medicines—the chymique, his apparatus, and the results of experimentation are the first real objects (not created by and for imaginative experiment) represented in the poem. These objects are the result of the pursuit of an Art, and “the arts, forc’d unto none, / Open to’all searchers, unpriz’d, if unknown” (Elegie III: “Change,” lines 5-6). No one is required to study alchemy, mineralogy, medicine, or astronomy. The truth will lie in wait. It is in searching, in trying, that the prize can be revealed.
Nowhere in Donne’s works is such a searching more evident than in “Twicknam Garden.” Donne suggests man’s use of Art to increase the potency of natural materials. It may be worth appreciating Twickenham as a country retreat used by Francis Bacon as an escape from the courtly drama and pressures of London: Bacon used the place for scientific contemplation and experimentation. Donne begins by seeking the panacea and ends with a recurring focus on laboratory process wherein he directs lovers to perform scientific procedures on his tears, demonstrating an iatrochemical approach to changing the qualities of materials in order to create pure medicines. Just as he does not satirize alchemy (all the time), he takes the next step and takes chemical medicine seriously. The poem begins with injury that must be healed by the medicine of the garden:

Blasted with sighs, and surrounded with teares,
Hither I come to seeke the spring,
And at mine eyes, and at mine eares,
Receive such balmes, as else cure every thing;
But O, selfe traytor, I do bring
The spider love, which transubstantiates all,
And can convert Manna to gall,
And that this place may thoroughly be thought
True Paradise, I have the serpent brought. (Lines 1-10)

It is worth asking whether we ought to understand the transubstantiative spider love as a piece of blasphemous wit. *The Oxford English Dictionary* shows that a majority—but not all—usage of “transubstantiate” centered on the religious transformation of the Eucharist. Donne uses the term in the *First Anniversary*, as seen above, to denote a
gilding—a transformation that is aesthetically pleasing but not substantive. In a letter the Countess of Huntingdon, which compares the recipient favorably with Eve, Donne suggests that Eve

but gilded us: But you are gold, and Shee,
Us she inform’d, but transubstantiates you,
Soft dispositions which ductile bee,
Eliarlike, she makes not cleane, but new.

(“Man to God’s Image” lines 25-28)

This usage demonstrates a combination of true material change—beyond the surface and into the body—experimented with and found “ductile,” one of the standard metallurgical criteria for pure gold. Surprisingly, we also find an alchemical simile in this context, showing the Elixir to be successful in thoroughly transmuting one material into another: there is not just a “cleane” surface, but a “new” and perfected matter entirely.

Due to Donne’s relentless metaphysical imagination and, perhaps partly, to his complicated Catholocism, transubstantiation is a fascinating concept for him. It is hard to imagine him truly believing in real, material transformation; but nonetheless as a metaphor and agent of completing thought experiments (hyperbolic or not), transubstantiation is valuable. In fact, we see as much in his typically eloquent and richly imagined sermon at St. Paul’s on Christmas of 1626:

And therefore Luther inferres well, that since miracles are so easie and cheape, and obvious to [the Roman Church], as they have induced a miraculous transubstantiation, they might have done well to have procured
one miracle more, a trans-accidentatation, that since the substance is changed, the accidents might have been changed too; and since there is no bread, there might be no dimensions, no colour, no nourishing, no other qualities of bread neither; for, these remaining, there is rather an annihilation of God, in making him no God by being a contradictory God, then an annihilation of the Bread, by making that, which was formerly bread, God himself, by that way of Transubstantiation.

While he argues that literal and thoroughly transmutational material change of the Eucharist—which retains qualities of bread even though it is supposed to be God—is self-contradictory, Donne suggests that the essence and nature of the bread have changed: “whereas the nature of bread is but to nourish the body, the nature of this bread now, is to nourish the soule.” It would be interesting to ask Donne what happens if one eats consecrated Eucharist without knowing the altered essence of the bread. Would one experience soul-nourishment, or is prior knowledge of the holy essence a necessary condition? The “spider love,” therefore, can be seen as a more material, literal transubstantiation, turning the material of manna into material of gall, as these two materials have nearly opposite essences but also opposite accidental qualities. For Donne, it seems that transubstantiation is useful in the context of alchemical metaphor, but is not to be taken literally in terms of the Eucharist.

The occasion for the presence of this spider love is to show how Donne is a “selfe traytor,” his own worst enemy, for attempting a self-cure in this garden. His eyes and ears, those Petrarchan portals of love-sickness, need to be cured by the panacea balm
present in the garden. Paracelsus, in his medical writings, demonstrates a recurring fascination with curative balms and balsams, especially as they relate to or become the alchemical panacea. Donne knows this cure-all is present, but has disrupted his own cure by introducing to the garden his “spider love,” that transubstantiates matter through reverse alchemy: the pure becomes ill. Spider connotations offer an overall feeling of creepiness in addition to more layers. The spider entraps, poisons, and kills. When Bassanio opens the leaden casket in *Merchant of Venice*, discovering Portia’s portrait, he describes how “Here in her hairs / The painter plays the spider, and hath woven / A golden mesh to entrap the hearts of men” (3.2.121-23). The *Oxford English Dictionary* provides examples of how spiders were thought to extract poison from flowers. Donne’s spider love is a poison and consumes that which it loves. Leontes from *A Winter’s Tale* provides an illustration suggesting that a spider’s poison is effective only if the victim is aware of the spider’s presence:

> There may be in the cup  
> A spider steeped and one may drink, depart,  
> And yet partake no venom, for his knowledge  
> Is not infected. But if one present  
> The abhorred ingredient to his eye, make known  
> How he hath drunk, he cracks his gorge, his sides,  
> With violent hefts. I have drunk, and seen the spider. (2.1.39-45)

As in Leontes’s thought experiment, Donne has indeed seen the spider—he brings the spider love—which is why the venom is effective. Knowledge of the spider’s presence
causes the previously unwitting man to vomit, just as it allows for transubstantiation of manna into gall.

Ultimately, Donne implores Love to “let mee / Some senseless peece of this place bee” (lines 15-16) and suggest he be made into “a stone fountain weeping out my yeare” (18). The poet is done with feeling, exhausted, we imagine, from being blasted and surrounded in the first line; ashamed or disappointed that he has “the serpent brought” into this implicit Eden. The prelapsarian elements of the garden—in fact, any physical detail at all beyond the suggestion that the garden is in season (“‘Twere wholesome for mee, that winder did / benight the glory of this place, / And that a grave frost did forbid / These trees to laugh, and mocke mee to my face” (lines 10-14)) occurs either in the mind of the poet, outside the poem, or not at all. Considering our author, it would be presumptuous to think, even in a short work distinctly named for a garden, that the critical subject of the poem is anything other than Donne himself. We see Donne aching to be a part of the garden that will forgive him any necessity to feel: “a stone fountaine.” That is, a stone fountain subverted by Donne (or perhaps as punishment for his actuating the fallen state of this garden) to the extent that it does not merely provide, project, or circulate water, but rather weeps. Even when he becomes stone, he must be sensate and capable of reaction to his own condition.

It is the weeping that allows for the third and final stanza, in which the poet entreats:

Hither with christall vyals, lovers come,
And take my teares, which are loves wine,
And try your mistresse Teares at home,

For all are false, that tast not just like mine (lines 19-22)

It is here, if not in his plea to Love that he be turned into a weeping fountain, that Donne leaves the poem entirely: the explicit audience of the entreaty—lovers—are specifically directed to collect the tears and take them home to perform a comparative analysis against them. The tears are the control in what amounts to a experimental balneology popular in the early seventeenth century: the evaporation and distillation of various waters collected from curative baths and other locations in order to determine the specific minerals, chemicals, and qualities responsible for supposed cures. The lovers use taste as the grounds for examination, adapting the metaphor through the “loves wine” metaphor, into an oenological experiment.

This scientific use of waters contrasts with Shakespeare’s essentially Galenic presentation of healing waters in sonnets 153 and 154; the quality of temperature and its in/ability to restore to balance “a sad distempered guest” (153 line 12). The cool waters have been heated by Cupid’s brand, resulting in hot baths that are inappropriate treatment for one burning up from love-sickness. The final line of the entire Sonnet sequence thus demonstrates a straightforward presentation of curing an imbalance of qualities by application of opposites: “Love’s fire heats water, water cools not love” (154 line 14). The hot water exacerbates the lover overheated by lovesickness and cannot therefore temper or rebalance the quality of temperature.

While it would be unfair to argue that “Twicknam Garden” degrades from this point, it could be said that the final five lines are a standard Donnean complexity on
woman’s inconstancy reminiscent of watching shadows cast on the walls of Plato’s cave
(“Nor can you more judge womans thoughts by teares, / Then by her shadow, what she
wears” (lines 24-25)): we cannot know what woman is or what she is true to, and
anyway, her type of truth is deadly: “O perverse sexe, where none is true but she, / Who’s
therefore true, because her truth kills mee” (lines 26-27).

As we know from popular television, it is important to explore the events that led
up to the killing. Lovers are instructed to gather the poet’s tears in “christall vyals,” and
to know that these tears are “loves wine.” The lovers must go to the source and collect
physical material to test. The test will yield “false” results, shifting the subjective matter
of love into a scientifically, chemically demonstrable exercise. Collaborative scientific
procedures are the best methods of discovery.

However, “A Nocturnall Upon S. Lucies Day” offers readers a more complex
dynamic: Hayes argues that alchemical imagery is the “controlling metaphor for the
creative process” in this poem and even goes so far as to label the narrative voice the
“alchemist-poet” (55). Most alchemical readings focus on lines 10-18, wherein can be
found evidence that Donne’s esoteric alchemy mirrors the exoteric art in creating
something new out of other elements, but that Donne’s ingredients are all insubstantial:

Study me then, you who shall lovers bee
At the next world, that is, at the next Spring:
For I am every dead thing,
In whom love wrought new Alchimie.
For his art did expresse
A quintessence even from nothingnesse,
From dull privations, and leane emptiness:
He ruin’d mee, and I am re-begot
Of absence, darknesse, death; things which are not. (Lines 10-18)

Donne *is* the process; Donne *is* the alembic that he implores the future lovers to “Study.”

Love again plays the role of alchemist, torturing the contents of the alembic, using the traditional metaphors of death and birth, the pure substance being created from the remains of originally faulty materials. Through the “absence, darknesse, death; things which are not,” something is created out of nothing (as from the paradoxical “two Chaosses” in line 25)—a perversion (or inversion) of production of the philosopher’s stone from mercury and sulfur, and the transmutation of gold from base material: “Donne uses alchemical imagery dramatically and flamboyantly and twists it into striking paradoxes” (Crawshaw 341).

The end result is a strong demonstration of the new esoteric alchemical uses over the traditional exoteric practices: “The ‘old’ alchemy, presumably, worked with things, but love has created a ‘new’ alchemy which uses nothings—absences, even death, to create new essences” (Hayes 56). Despite this break with the past (or perhaps to strengthen his own position on the “new side” by redefining the old terminology), we see unquestionably alchemical terms and phrases, including “drownd the whole world,” “two Chaoses,” “Elixer,” “stones,” and the revific properties of the sun (lines 37-38).

Even though Donne is “the Elixer grown,” (line 29) he is more importantly completely insubstantial by this point: no longer material, he is not even a quality of
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materials: “If I an ordinary nothing were, / As shadow, a light, and body must be here. / But I am None” (lines 35-37). This is why the sun will no longer shine on him. Donne claims that “I, by loves limbecke, am the grave / Of all, that’s nothing,” and that he and his lover “Oft a flood / Have we two wept, and so / Drowned the whole world, us two” (lines 21-24), demonstrating the alchemical stage of putrefaction (death) and the complicated alchemical baggage surrounding waters, drowning, and flooding. The raw material goes through various stages of dropsy, hydroptic conditions, bathing, baptism, and the combination of tears or fountain waters from two sources (mercurial and sulphurous, female and male) to create the ultimate exalted stone. There is no one consistent use of floods and waters in the alchemical treatises of the period, apart from their ubiquity in the process. Regardless, Donne withdraws the lovers’ souls from the material in an ecstasy: “And often absences / Withdrew our soules, and made us carcasses” (lines 26-27). After becoming the linmec, the grave of all that’s nothing, and half of a weeping pair, becomes a chaos and ultimately refuses to stay, escaping a dead body through an ecstatic separation of the soul. Rather than perfect an alchemical projection, Donne simply absents himself. He will be nothing by the time the spring arrives.

Donne digs mines to learn about the body and cuts open the body to learn about the world. As a result he ends up questioning the gaps in a one-to-one relationship between the micro- and macrocosm, including the moral responsibility in mineralogy. In “The Curse,” Donne asks the natural world to make available its arsenal of poisons, from what seems a list of sources benign if not beneficial materials to man’s existence: “what Plants, Mynes, Beasts, Foul, Fish, / Can contribute” (lines 27-28). The passive materials
are themselves called upon to release their potential. Everything is poisonous or medicinal, depending upon the application of chemical art to reduce and refine the elements into proper concentration and dosage. Recall the passage from *The First Anniversary*: “An Anatomy of the World,” where we saw that “Since herbes, and roots, by dying lose not all, / But they, yea Ashes too, are medicinall” (lines 403-4). It is through the method of intentional preparation, not simply in the natural herbal qualities, that natural materials transform from herbal simples to iatrochemical medicines.

Of course there are naturally occurring poisons as well. In Holy Sonnet IX, Donne questions the differences between these hazardous phenomena and his own culpability:

If poisonous minerals, and if that tree,
Whose fruit threw death on else immortall us,
If lecherous goats, if serpents envious
Cannot be damn’d; Alas; why should I bee?
Why should intent or reason, borne in mee,
Make sinnes, else equall, in mee more heinous? (Lines 1-6)

Donne identifies what truly separates him from nature, the microcosm from the macrocosm: “intent or reason.” These qualities of man that cannot be found in anatomy, seen in animals, or discovered in the mineralogy of a mine seem to trouble him. Murder, lust, and envy are all benign when the occur due to natural phenomena, but, when demonstrated by him, they are mortal sins. Just as Donne seems to leverage morality to separate himself, we notice that the rhetorical tone to the question—and the existence of the poem at all—demonstrate a disappointed acceptance of the contradiction in
sympathies. We might think that he had already overcome this issue in Holy Sonnet V, where he states matter-of-factly:

I am a little world made cunningly
Of Elements, and an Angelike spright,
But black sinne hath betraid to endless night
My worlds both parts, and (oh) both parts must die. (Lines 1-4)

He knows and even seems to celebrate his clear knowledge that his material body is in direct relationship with the material world, but that his soul sets him apart. This poem even asks God to incinerate him so that he may be healed. Holy Sonnet IX agrees that he should be damned for intentional transgressions, but instead of asking for a purifying fire, or asking God to undo the seeming injustice of applying two sets of rules to nature and man, he asks God to “forget” (line 14). If God is willing to forget the sins that have a physical basis to them, to see man’s actions as simply a reflection of natural processes in the larger world, it seems Donne would be satisfied with the result as fair treatment. Of course, Donne does not really want to be treated the same as minerals, fruits, goats, or serpents. He wants the fate of his soul to be separated from the fate of his body.

The double chaos of the poem is a double-nothing, but also contains the potential for creation, a new Genesis from which Donne never emerges. Creation of matter, specifically concerning the purity and spiritual character of the earth’s *prima materia* would certainly have been on Donne’s mind. Although he is often concerned with destroying and creating himself in the poetry, he cannot in the “Nocturnall” recreate himself as a purified form from the chaos. The hylozoistic worldview of the animistic
spirituality of matter, rampant in alchemical writings, does not apply once Donne has ecstatically separated his soul from his body.

Paracelsus consistently uses Biblical models for illustrating the alchemical process. The most important for him is John 12:24 (mentioned by Linden in *The Alchemy Reader*), which is recognized as the Scriptural passage revealing the importance of the putrefaction and subsequent fermentation (revitalization) stage of transmutation: “Verily, verily, I say unto you, except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit.” Paracelsus uses this as a commanding explanatory image in beginning *Of the Nature of Things* (as in Linden, *Alchemy Reader* 152). Donne is well aware of what is supposed to happen after an alchemical death: the resurrection and purification that results in the fruitful completion of the process. To avoid this possibility for self-exaltation, Donne breaks the process and becomes adamant that he has become nothing. It is important for him to be completely absent from the return of the lovers’ spring: there can be no hope of resurrection for him.

Scriptural models typically result in a Chrisotlogical alchemy, wherein Christ is vehicle for the stone—he *is* the philosopher’s stone, undergoing torture and death before returning to life as a pure force capable of projecting his salvific grace on mankind, an image which “pervades Christian alchemy” (Crawshaw 347) and provides all the more reason that Donne cannot return after his self-obliteration.

“Resurrection, Imperfect” is the poster-child for Christian alchemical readings of Donne’s work. It is important to recall the distinction between the object of the stone and the action of its projection. The stone provides is the catalyst for the process of perfection
through the projection. In a typical Donnean contraction and combination, Christ is both the perfected stone and the transmuted gold. Duncan provides the first, and perhaps clearest, reading of this poem as a Christian model for the alchemical process:

The biblical teaching that death is a necessary preliminary to regeneration was adopted into alchemical theory and, on the basis of analogy to vegetable life, made the foundation of hypotheses regarding the natural generation as well as a the artificial transmutation of metals. Dying, or as the alchemists oftener expressed it, mortification, corruption, or putrefaction, was thought to reduce the first elements and so prepare the way for new and better generation…. [Donne] expounds the death and resurrection of Christ in terms of the alchemical death and resurrection of gold. (Duncan 277)

Duncan does well to note that the subjective improvement to the dying material, that the new life will be a “better generation” than the old. Duncan succumbs to the opacity of the alchemical process at large, however, when he stumbles and conflates the philosopher’s stone—which undergoes death and resurrection in the process of its creation—to the death and resurrection of gold. On the darkest day of the year, Donne’s mortification, reduction to chaos and ultimately nothing, divorces itself from the regenerative process of the seasons and the lovers that will return in the spring. He disappears into the darkness, undergoing alchemical destruction but not emerging or resurrecting into the final stages of the process. True alchemical resurrection of the perfected lapis is, in Donne’s poetry, reserved for Christ. We are left with a soulless carcass, devoid even of descriptive
physical qualities, dissolving into the “Nocturnall’s” climactic projection at the moment where Donne should have some properties. He should be Donne, “But I am None” (line 37).

This separation is clearly seen in the subsequent Holy Sonnet X, the flagship of dualism in the poetic Donne fleet, “Death be not proud.” The only physical representation of the body is seen in the “bones” of the great men who die soonest: Donne is so cool and confident in this poem that the death of the physical body is a non-issue. Of course we must allow for the possibility of resurrection of the body as well. The Geneva text of Hosea 13:14, certainly an influence for Donne’s sonnet, brings the physical grave into the equation: “I will redeem them from the power of the grave: I will deliver them from death: O death, I will be thy death: O grave, I will be thy destruction: repentance is hid from my eyes.” In Donne’s version of the resurrection, the soul seems to maintain the characteristics of the individual: “One short sleepe past, wee wake eternally,” suggesting continuation of the mind within the soul, completely independent of the body. The man who fell asleep is the same one that awakens.

While the dualism of Aquinas allows for the soul to exist outside the body, Donne’s dualism additionally allows personality and lifelike consciousness to remain part of the eternal soul. Instead of an eternal soul in general, the soul is John Donne’s soul, with John Donne’s mind intact. The following chapter will explore the ways in which Donne maximizes his unique brand of ecstasy, where he continually sends his soul and mind outside of his body.
In the previous chapter, we saw Donne’s fascination with the potential of new medicine. Through repeated dissection and vivisection, scientific testing of his tears, evaluation of his skull and heart, the poet’s Paracelsian and iatrochemical tendencies revealed themselves. Guibbory states that, despite Donne’s occasional skepticism, “his poetry, with its emphasis on the process of active discovery, its skeptical stance towards received ideas and poetic conventions, and its sense of excitement at making fresh discoveries about human experience, is a poetic counterpart of the enquiry taking place in many fields in the seventeenth century” (129). The current chapter will explore how Donne continues this excitement of discovery through leaving the body. His most extensive studies of iatrochemistry and Paracelsian thought are undertaken in the context of ecstasy. The intense alchemical dualism of “The Extasie,” and the longer prose works Ignatius His Conclave (1611) and Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions (1624) will illuminate and complicate his fluctuating position on the Galenico-Paracelsian debate before arriving at the possibility that Donne, himself, is the disease.

It is shocking that Stanton Linden’s 1996 study Darke Hierogliphicks: Alchemy in English Literature from Chaucer to the Restoration passes over the bulk of “The Exstasie,” mentioning only that the two souls become one “abler soule” in line 43 (Linden 176). A truly exhaustive reading of the poem’s thinly-veiled alchemy is also beyond the scope of the current study, but key elements must be explored. Donne
provides a fascinating alchemical process to explore what it means for the soul to leave the body, and why, ultimately, it must return. On “A Pregnant bank,”

Sat we two, one anothers best.
Our hands were firmely cimented
With a fast balme, which thence did spring,
Our eye-beames twisted, and did thred
Our eyes, upon one double string;
So to ’entergraft our hands, as yet
Was all the meanes to make us one,
And pictures in our eyes to get
Was all our propagation. (Lines 4-12)

Donne presents us with a representation of the beginning stages of the alchemical process as visualized in nearly all treatises of the period. Depending on the specific treatise or engraving, this stage of cementation (or cimentation) is represented by the male and female, King and Queen, or sun and moon, standing in for elemental sulphur and mercury. The lovers are sitting side by side, the physical connection of the hands and intertwining of the fingers beautifully repeated in the interweaving of the eye-beams—an image which is unique to Donne. At this moment of unity, the ecstasy begins, quietly and parenthetically:

As ‘twixt two equal Armies, Fate
Suspends uncertain victorie,
Our soules, (which to advance their state,
Were gone out,) hung ‘twixt her, and mee.
And whil’st our soules negotiate there,
Wee like sepulchral statues lay;
All day, the same our postures were,
And wee said nothing, all the day. (Lines 13-20)

Donne has drawn in verse one of the most ubiquitous alchemical images: the King and Queen, the sulphur and mercury, the red and the white, side by side. (Although the passage begins with the lovers seated and staring into each other’s eyes, presumably across from one another, the “sepulchral statues” suggest they are now lying side by side.) This is represented in engravings as the King and Queen touching feet, holding hands, standing face to face, sharing a bath, or lying side by side in a coffin as they slowly merge into one element. Donne is careful to note the passage of time through the repetition of “day,” asserting the motionless, silent passage of real (not collapsed or expanded poetic) time.

The souls seem to combine, “by love refin’d,” (line 21) and are formed into “a new concoction” that is “far purer” than the original two souls (lines 27-28). The procedure up to this point is finally identified as an ecstasy in line 29, after which the poet explains that

as all severall soules containe
Mixture of things, they know not what,
Love, these mixt soules doth mixe againe,
And makes both one, each this and that. (Lines 33-36)

We are reminded of “The Good Morrow,” which taught us “What ever dyes, was not mixt equally” (line 19), a certain allusion to alchemical insistence on proper proportions of ingredients in each step of the process needed to keep the alembic’s material alive.
Since the ecstatic souls are mixing, refining, and complementing one another so well at this point, we know that they were mixed in equal proportion. Once this mixture is complete, the next alchemical process is that of multiplication, expressed through the image of a violet that “Redoubles still, and multiplies” (line 40). In the alembic, just as in nature, the one becomes many. In this particularly metaphysical exploration of the combination of two souls into one, whereby the one soul becomes greater than the sum of its parts, the end result is one stable soul, one that will not die:

When love, with one another so
Interanimates two soules,
That abler soule, which thence doth flow,
Defects of loneliness controules.
Wee then, who are this new soule, know,
Of what we are compos’d and made,
For, th’Atomies of which we grow,
Are soules, whom no change can invade. (Lines 41-48)

Similar to characteristic alchemical writing of the period that continually marks the visual process through its stages, Donne carefully reminds us that each step has gone according to plan, that the combination is stable, and that the resulting product is immutable. This moment looks backward on the successful mixture and plants a flag in the alchemical stage known as fixation, where the combined ingredients are now safely merged together and fused as one stable material.

Although the alchemical project is not complete, this moment allows Donne to take a breath and remind us that the bodies are still lying on the ground. Although they
have not been involved in the alchemical ecstasy of the souls, they are not to be dismissed entirely:

But O alas, so long, so farre
Our bodies why do wee forbeare?
They’are ours, though they’are not wee, Wee are
The intelligences, they the spheare.
We owe them thankes, because they thus,
Did us, to us, at first convey,
Yeelded their forces, sense, to us,
Nor are dross to us, but allay. (Lines 49-56)

In this sweet capsule of dualistic play, Donne separates the roles of the body and soul. The soul is tied to intellectual identity, since the bodies “are not wee,” and indeed the bodies are defined as possessions. The souls are the “intelligences” or the containers of rationality, intellect, whereas the bodies are the “spheare,” the physical boundary to which the souls are fixed (like stars to the celestial sphere; or angelic intelligences in their appropriately ranked spheres). It is important that the body, once separated from the soul, is not a disposable byproduct of this purification. The metallurgical imagery showing the bodies are not “drosse to us, but allay” is appropriate to the alchemical project. Allay can be understood in two senses. The first is that the body is a combination of precious metal and a filler metal, such as gold mixed with copper. The second possibility, one that is more convincing, is that the body is not itself an allay (a mixture), but is the allay material: it is the copper that mixes with the more precious metal of the soul. The contrast
with “dross” makes it clear that their bodies are a critical part of the process, not abandoned corpses.

Donne steps away from metallurgy for a moment and engages a medical explanation of the refining of blood into animating spirit that defines the connection between body and soul:

As our blood labours to beget
Spirits, as like soules as it can,
Because such fingers need to knit
That subtile knot, which makes us man. (Lines 61-64)

After the spirits have been refined (by the heart, by the brain, or by the blood itself), the work is not done. The animating spirit of the soul must return to the body and enable it to interact physically with the surrounding world:

So must pure lovers soules descend
T’affections, and to faculties,
Which may reach and apprehend,
Else a great Prince in prison lies. (Lines 65-69)

In defining the relationship of the soul to the body, Donne has achieved the most powerful alchemical image of the poem. The “Prince in prison,” also represented as a prince or king sealed in a coffin (or bedridden at the final moment of crisis before the cure), is the common image for the philosopher’s stone inside the alembic at the end of the successful alchemical process. To hold the prince inside the prison (to keep the

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29 An exhaustive list of alchemical treatises that represent this image visually or textually is beyond the scope of this study. The sick king, the king in prison, or the king in the grave can be found in almost any
alchemical quintessence inside the alembic), is to stop right before the moment of achieving the practical goal of the entire enterprise. The prince must be freed, the stone must be decanted from the glass vessel in its liquid form, in order to make use of it. If the stone is not allowed to interact with the outside world, it does not matter that it is the philosopher’s stone—it might as well be a piece of gravel. The soul of this poem has gone through the alchemical processes of combination, purification, multiplication, and fixation before arriving at its complete and final state whence it descends down into the body in order to interact usefully, through the body, with the physical world.

The trope of the imprisoned soul is reprised in Holy Sonnet IV, that anthem of the period’s fashionable melancholy and of Donne’s continuous dualistic distancing. Bodily sickness makes the soul aware of its imprisonment. However, a release from jail would only move the soul to the executioner since it is in no condition to achieve an eternal reprieve. The blackness of the soul so dramatically introduced in the first line reinforces Donne’s self-aware melancholic diagnosis in “La Corona,” which was a “crown of prayer and praise, / Weav’d in my low devout melancholie” (lines 1-2). Sickness, devotion, and an ecstatic separation of soul from body are a consistent trifecta throughout the devotional poetry and the extended prose works Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions and Ignatius His Conclave. Holy Sonnet IV expands the melancholy diagnosis from Donne himself to his soul through the color black. The blackness signifies a soul lacking...
grace which must dress itself in mourning black before becoming visibly altered through color changes demonstrating the process of forgiveness of sin through the blood of the savior:

Oh my blacke Soule! now thou art summoned
By sickenesse, deaths hearld, and champion;
Thou art like a pilgrim, which abroad hath done
Treason, and durst not turne to whence hee is fled,
Or like a thiefe, which till deaths doome be read,
Wisheth himselfe delivered from prison;
But damn’d and hal’d to execution,
Wisheth that still he might be imprisoned.
Yet grace, if thou repent, thou canst not lacke;
But who shall give thee that grace to beginne?
Oh make thy selfe with holy mourning blacke,
And red with blushing, as thou art with sinne;
Or wash thee in Christs blood, which hath this might
That being red, it dyes red soules to white.

The poem’s image of sickness as “deaths herald, and champion” will be revisited in the Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions, which is rife with the inverse relationship of bodily and spiritual health. In this sonnet, however, we see that sickness (melancholy) does not immediately ameliorate the soul, as it is the “blacke Soule” that is the disease. For this reason, the sonnet compares the soul to both a pilgrim a thief. The pilgrim is really a fugitive, having done treason rather than obeisance; or having done treason and fled abroad, preventing a true round-trip pilgrimage involving the typical geometries of
origin-destination-origin. The cycle is broken and dysfunctional. The thief craves release from prison, only to be granted the ultimate release, death, at which point imprisonment becomes preferable: he truly fears judgment more than death (a concept we are familiar with, among other poems, Holy Sonnet XIV). Whereas in “The Exstasie,” the soul without use of the body was “the great Prince in prison,” this sonnet presents the body itself as the prison. The sonnet has given up on the body entirely: there is no discussion of how the body’s sickness may be cured, only the warning that when the soul leaves prison, it will die, “damn’d and hal’d to execution.” By suffering through damnation as well as execution, the soul proves both immaterial and physical.

Once the lawbreaking comparisons and the rhetorical question of line 10 have been spoken, the poet begins to direct the soul toward salvation. Unlike many questions in Donne’s poetry, “But who shall give thee that grace to beginne?” is answered, but strangely, by two alternatives. Lines 11-12 seem to give agency to the poet, who seems to be doubling up (or forgetting about) the soul’s blackness by dressing in mourning, and adding redness through the bizarre and supremely metaphysical image of a soul “red with blushing.” Where does this redness come from? Evidently the soul changes color as grace brings consciousness of guilt. Is it somewhat troubling, then, to have the expected soul healer, Christ, listed seemingly as an alternative “Or wash thee in Christ’s blood,” rather than the one true answer (emphasis mine)? In this dual presentation of soul-cure, the soul is acquiring grace that produces shame, a red color that can be associated with Christ’s salvific blood. Rhetorically, we see that the second option is more thoroughly to be preferred, as the blood of the savior has transformational qualities to it: once the red
blood is applied to the red (ashamed, aware of sin) soul, the soul then changes color to white. Notice that the blood cannot wash the soul while it is black; its redness shows it wants to meet Christ halfway. The concept of Christ as alchemist of the soul is alluded to through the color changes. By applying Christ’s red blood to the black soul, the salvific potency of the blood “dyes red soules to white.” The red and the white is a traditional alchemical phrase, referring to the colors and color changes in the process. They stand for elemental sulphur and lead, iron and lead, the sun and the moon, Mars and Venus, gold and silver, as well as other materials and processes in the arcane art.

While an alchemical reading of the colors is an exercise that may or may not be productive, the end result of the ecstasy in Holy Sonnet IV complicates the seemingly joyful and mutually beneficial relationship of body and soul in “The Exstasie.” We now see that the soul begins to separate from the body not when holding hands on a picnic blanket surrounded by violets, but when it is “summoned / By sicknesse, deaths herald and champion.” Physical disease pries the soul loose for inspection.

In no other work by Donne is there so much prying and prodding of the soul during physical sickness as in his Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions. Allen very aptly describes the Devotions as “a fine clinical account of the progress of an illness” (322) and as “that treatise on the futility of medicine” (336). Ostensibly written during or immediately after a very trying illness, the work is modeled on 23 sections, or “Stations of the Sickness.” Each Station contains three subsections: a Meditation on the current state of his illness, an Expostulation on what this means for his spirituality, and a Prayer. Reading like a hyperbolic prose version of the greatest hits of his metaphysical poetry,
the *Devotions* strives to find the metaphorical geometries and cosmic structures that can accommodate his constantly shifting understanding of the soul’s relationship to the body. The Donne presented here is understandably fraught, as he goes through multiple treatments and uncertain diagnoses from his physicians, but he is never anxious as George Herbert often tends to be. As he approaches the threshold of anxiety, Donne distracts himself with paradox, shifting relativity, mirrored reflections, and inversions of previous macrocosmic models.

That is, of course, when he isn’t absolutely bathing in the drama of his condition:

> So that now, we do not only die, but die upon the rack, die by the torment of sickness; nor that only, but are pre-afflicted, super-afflicted with these jealousies and suspicions and apprehensions of sickness, before we can call it a sickness: we are not sure we are ill; one hand asks the other by the pulse, and our eye asks our own urine how we do. O multiplied misery! We die, and cannot enjoy death, because we die in this torment of sickness.

This passage, from the first Meditation of the first Station, introduces the reader to post-lapsarian mortality: although man was modeled on God’s image and therefore had the potential for immortality, man bungled it with original sin. Although intense and agitated, Donne remains organized and in control. He is frustrated without being overwhelmed—he knows exactly what the problem is. It is not only sickness, but the concern and uncertainty (the jealousy, suspicion, and apprehension) of whether or not sickness is present, that combine into something worse. It is not paranoia or
hypochondria, but the futility of knowing that sickness will separate the soul from the
body before we even know that sickness is present. This uncertainty of whether sickness
is present occurs elsewhere: in Elegie IV, “The Perfume,” he blames perfume for
masking olfactory diagnosis: “Base excrement of the earth, which dost confound / Sense,
from distinguishing the sicke from the sound” (lines 57-58). One hand checks the pulse
on the opposite wrist while, in a beautifully Donne-flavored maneuver, his eye examines
the urine flask. Sensory perception is crucial to the cure of sickness, but we aren’t always
sure what our observations mean. Such is the empirical part of the frustration with
medicine that Donne will explore in depth. We will see that Donne is not merely an
empiricist but also a rationalist, working through his understanding of matter to
determine the truths underlying the unobservable.

The First Meditation demonstrates a shift in Donne’s typical appreciation of the
sympathies between the microcosm and macrocosm. He is no longer “a little world made
cunningly” but a critical reader of all the destructive forces of nature that cause harm by
their operations on the smaller scale:

Is this the honour which man hath by being a little world, that he hath
these earthquakes in himself, sudden shakings; these lightnings, sudden
flashes; these thunders, sudden noises; these eclipses, sudden offuscations
and darkening of his senses; these blazing stars, sudden fiery exhalations;
these rivers of blood, sudden red waters?

Through this graphic miniature catalogue of natural phenomena, Donne continually puts
the visual emphasis on the macrocosmic side of the ledger, not specifically illustrating
how these are translated in the human form. Once he has been overtaken by sickness, Donne seems incapable of anatomizing his own body. Of course, every passage in *Devotions* reflects his physical suffering, but we lose the special attention to anatomical minutiae of the earlier poetry. Instead, he uses sickness as a catalyst for exploring the relationships of body/earth, body/soul, soul/body, and soul/heavens.

Donne’s dualism is not reinvented during his sickness, but the union of soul to body becomes a tense opposition of forces. “Earth is the centre of my body, heaven is the centre of my soul; these two are the natural places of these two; but those go not to these two in an equal pace: my body falls down without pushing; my soul does not go up without pulling” (Meditation II). The body is continually pulled toward earth, dying from the moment of the first breath. The soul needs to ascend to heaven with divine intervention.30 We can see that the combination of soul and body is no longer the languid, calming teamwork of exchanging sensory information and spiritual presence to complete the human experience, the liberation of an alchemical prince from prison. When Donne is suffering from sickness, the soul and the body are two mis-matched roommates sharing a first-floor flat: the body really wants a garden-level studio and the soul a heavenly high-rise.

This strain between his body and soul contributes to Donne’s dissatisfaction with other models of sympathy. As a physician is sent for at the beginning of the Fourth

30 This vertically-oriented dualism was expressed on the horizontal axis ten years earlier in “Good Friday, 1613. Riding Westward.” “Hence is’t, that I am carried toward the West / This day, when my soules form bends toward the east” (lines 9-10). Donne enjoys exploring the moments when the body and the soul are moving (or being pulled) in opposite directions.
Meditation, Donne decides that the microcosm and macrocosm no longer accurately reflect one another:

It is too little to call man a little world: except God, man is a diminutive to nothing. Man consists of more pieces, more parts, than the world; than the world doth, nay, than the world is. And if those pieces were extended, and stretched out in a man as they are in the world, man would be the giant, and the world the dwarf; the world but the map, and the man the world….for as the world hath nothing, to which something in man doth not answer, so hath man many pieces of which the whole world hath no representation. (Meditation IV)

Man is larger than the world. The ellipsis in the above quotation includes physical examples that suggest Donne really is a physical model as well as a conceptual one. The world, in being reduced to but a map of man, has been reduced from macrocosm to microanthropos. Exaltation of the physical body on a such a grand scale is a bizarre position for Donne and must be attributed to his extreme bodily discomfort combined with his inability to focus on actual physical description of his symptoms. In “Hymn to God My God, In My Sickness,” Donne presents a converse image: the sick body becomes a map for his physicians, who, “by their love are growne / Cosmographers” reading his body (lines 6-7). Again his symptoms are not explored beyond the pun of his suffering straits conflated with the geographical (and not cosmic) straits of Magellan and Gibraltar. At this point in the Devotions, we have learned all about the hydraulics of the soul, and the need for God’s intervention with saving grace. Yet all we know about Donne’s
symptoms are vague references to a sweat, some shivering, and perhaps cloudy vision. So although man is larger and more complex than the macrocosm, he certainly has his shortcomings.

Man’s largest failure at this point in the work is redolent with both Galenism and Paracelsianism. Donne says that God “didst make physic before there was any drudging of any sickness; for thou didst imprint a medicinal virtue in many simples, even from the beginning,” echoing von Hohenheim’s insistence on all cures existing physically near the cause of disease, as well as suggesting the efficacy of herbal remedy (25). But the cause of disease seems to be contained in man already, a suggestion of Galenic humoralism: “so this world, ourselves, produces all these in us, in producing diseases, and sicknesses of all those sorts” (24). And while the disease is caused from within the body, man lacks the ability of animals to find the right external cure for himself: “man hath not that innate instinct, to apply those natural medicines to his present danger, as those inferior creatures have; he is not his own apothecary, his own physician, as they are” (24). This realization causes Donne to recall his earlier restructuring of the world, his shrinking of the macrocosm to but an inferior map of the body. The macrocosm is able to heal itself, while the microcosm must call for a doctor.

Consigned to the need for physicians, Donne, through the remainder of the *Devotions*, revels in the symmetry created by the separation of body and soul. The Prayer of the Fourth Station introduces the inverse relationship between the health of the body and the health of the soul: “without thee all health is but the fuel, and all strength but the bellows of sin.” In the absence of God, a hydraulic relationship between body and
soul pushes the soul down as the body rises. In the absence of a physician (but with God’s presence), the soul may rise up even as the body descends. Thus “the necessity of two physicians, authorized by thee, the bodily, and the spiritual physician.” The soul separated from the body is no longer the great prince lying in prison. Rather than a necessary interweaving of the body and soul, Donne seems to be anticipating a living separation of the two. If the body and soul each have a separate physician, there must be a gap between the two to define the limits of each medicine.

The two medicines required to heal body and soul are both described with a Galenic model. Here Donne adheres to traditional mechanics and avoids the newer medicines: “As physic works, so it draws the peccant humour to itself, that, when it is gathered together, the weight of itself may carry that humour away; so thy Spirit returns to my memory my former sins, that, being so recollected, they may pour out themselves by confession” (67). It is through penitence that true spiritual healing will occur.

It ultimately seems like Donne wants to argue that he has the unhealthiest soul since Creation: he is reveling in his own guilt of original sin, and lying in a bed of sin for his entire fifty years of life. Through a sort of hyperbolic full-throttle confessional, he strives for complete remission of his sins and thus demonstrates his humble penitence and desire for saving grace. Even when meditating on the deaths of others, Donne turns the attention back to himself. When exploring original sin, it is always ultimately about Donne. There can be no doubt, by the end of the Devotions, that the author has fully prostrated himself spiritually all the while quoting and paraphrasing heavily from the Old Testament. If he were to die (which he seems continually to be doing), we would not be
surprised to see his soul rising as his body is lowered into the grave. In turning the lens inward, in reducing the medicine to standard Galenism and faith in God, Donne has created a pseudo-medieval auto-hagiography.

Kate Gartner Frost characterizes the *Devotions* as a Hezekiad, and reminds us that the “figure of Hezekiah and the pattern of his illness and repentance inform the tradition of spiritual autobiography consistently through the Middle Ages and eventually appear in Donne’s own attempt at the genre” (*Holy Delight* 30). Donne draws consistently from Kings, Samuel, and Chronicles, showing that he is perhaps writing his own work with one (sweaty, feverish) hand while holding the Old Testament in the other. It would be unfair and woefully incomplete to say that Donne purposefully modeled the work on the biblical accounts of King Hezekiah, but there are parallel elements that merit attention. There are three Old Testament versions of the story of Hezekiah as a sick king. The account from Isaiah 38 shows Hezekiah’s prayer of thanksgiving, followed illogically by his cure by figs. 2 Kings 20 shows the king praying to God, who promises Hezekiah fifteen more years of life. The prophet Isaiah then orders a lump of figs to be applied to the boil, and Hezekiah survives. The account from 2 Kings matches Isaiah 38 as Hezekiah prays and then receives a fig plaster applied to a boil. The third account, from 2 Chronicles 32, asserts that the king was proud during his sickness and was cured through his prayer by demonstrating a spiritual shift to humility, without giving details of the cure, his prayer, or any miraculous sign of intervention. Isaiah and the figs are not present in 2 Chronicles.
There needs no Hebrew scholar to tell us it’s not about the figs. The sick king Hezekiah is cured by the application of penitence to his own soul, not a schmear of dried fruit paste to his arm. Donne was intimately familiar with these accounts of the sick king, found them appealing, and almost certainly had them in mind when writing the *Devotions*. What the Hezekiad offers Donne is a model for the very type of healing that he finds most efficacious in his time of crisis: prayer and humility for a hale soul even at the moment that the body is failing. The figs play a role similar to the emetics that Donne is prescribed during his own ailment: a traditional medicine that is included to provide a sense of real-world danger and physical assistance, but by no means the true cure.

In these circumstances, Donne is staunchly demonstrative of a medieval attitude toward disease, when “it was impossible to separate bodily events from their spiritual significance. The relationship between body and soul was so intricate and so multifaceted that disease was necessarily a psychosomatic entity” (Grmek 257). Through the tangled spiritual and physical connection, Donne’s presentation ultimately sounds more like a penitential Psalm than a Hezekiad. Verses two and three of Psalm 6 seem particularly relevant: “O Lord, heal me; for my bones are vexed. My soul is also sore vexed.” The direct relationship of bodily to spiritual health, a staple of medieval thought and one that Donne continually explores, is found elegantly expressed in Psalm 38: “There is no soundness in my flesh because of thine anger; neither is there any rest in my bones because of my sin” (verse 3). The final penitential Psalm ends with a conceptual separation of the soul from the body, as we see the soul as a separate ens subject to
affliction from the outside: “And in thy mercy cut off mine enemies, and destroy all them that afflict my soul” (143:12). Donne does not conceive of separate self and enemy—he is his own enemy, the cause of his soul’s own sickness which he attempts to cure during the near-destruction of his own body.

We saw above that Donne attempted to separate the body from the soul, creating a true boundary so that each half of the patient became its own entity, each requiring a specialist physician. At the end, however, we see that Donne is ultimately incapable of really separating the two. To ecstatically separate the soul from the body in a poetic thought experiment is one thing: to hold the soul at arm’s length and acknowledge it will separate only at the death of the body is another. Kitzes skeptically wonders, “is there not perhaps something just the slightest bit false about a meditation on one’s own sickness unto death, at least insofar as nobody is ever in a position to write the truth of their own death (which is, naturally, impervious to personal experience)?” (108). The artifact of the written work itself certainly does stand in the way of creating a perfectly accurate account of the moment of death. However, “false” is probably too perjorative a word for the kind of project Donne has undertaken. The work is about sickness, but there is very little about physical conditions, beyond sweat, some shivering, and blurred vision. Donne is not just discovering for himself but also attempting to teach others “how to” think about their own mortality. The material conditions at the moment of death are not significant to Donne, and the spiritual aftermath of the final separation of soul and body is already determined. This is an issue of faith; not an issue of truth or falsehood. In a long prose work spurred by physical sickness, he explores the health of his soul using
medical models, and discusses his sickness and recovery using biblical parallels of penitence that ultimately may echo the penitential Psalms more than they do Isaiah and Chronicles. If we are looking for a dualistically ailing biblical king analogue, Donne seems to share more with David than Hezekiah. Donne’s repeated ecstasies in *Devotions* allows for a combined spiritual and medical inventory in which the soul’s physician is God and the body’s physician is old-fashioned Galenic.

To explore the newer science, the actual uses of Paracelsian iatrochemistry outside the boundaries of poetic metaphor, Donne radically distances himself from the subject matter in *Ignatius His Conclave*. Donne leaves his body in order to witness Ignatius of Loyola holding conclave with Lucifer to decide who should or should not be allowed into hell. Donne doesn’t send a spiritual soul as much as it is an intellectual capacity of soul. Donne describes this in a letter to Goodyer: “If I knew that I were ill, I were well; for we consist of three parts, a Soul, and Body, and Minde” the last of the three coming from a combination of soul and body, like the sound produced when breath moves through a trumpet. It is this self-aware nonphysical part of Donne that leaves the body, not a purely spiritual Aquinian soul.

This ecstatic distancing is enhanced by the prefatory material of the published work itself. In the introductory note from “The Printer to the Reader” informs us that the text was acquired as a friend of a friend of the author, establishing a feigned lack of interest by the author himself. The soul left the body, witnessed a scene in hell, and returned to the body. The recombined body/soul then writes up the account which passes to a friend, to another friend, and then to the printer. The borderline farcical layering of
distances and buffers between Donne and his subject matter is belied by the near-simultaneous publication of both Latin and English editions of the work. However, Coffin and others have noted the careless printing of the English edition, where even the errata sheet contains errors. So perhaps Donne was distant from the text. It is just as likely that the printing of the English duodecimo was completed before Donne could or did get involved with reviewing proofs. Regardless of the historical reasons for printing errors, it is stated clearly that the author is a distant fourth in the text’s chain of custody.

Once inside the text itself, the dialogue format additionally serves to distance the author from the text, reminiscent of More’s *Utopia*, creating a safer environment in which to discuss and debate. The words will be spoken by characters, not by Donne. In this way, Donne can show his complex understanding of new medicines by using the character of Paracelsus both as a mouthpiece and as a subject of discussion for the other characters. Through Paracelsus’s speech and through the observations of other characters, we might finally catch a glimpse of Donne’s position on iconoclastic iatrochemistry. T.S. Healy, editor of the Oxford edition of *Ignatius*, complicates the idea that we might actually learn about Donne’s position, when he states that he “cannot escape the impression that Copernicus is included for reasons of pure topicality” (xxix). Coffin’s introduction to the Facsimile Text Society edition states that Donne’s 1611 publication is soon after Kepler’s 1606 *De stella in cygno* and Galileo’s 1610 *Siderius nuncius*, supporting the topicality of the dramatis personae of *Ignatius*.

What Healy and Coffin do not suggest (or address) is that Paracelsus is included for pure topicality. If Donne is publishing amidst big new works on the structure of the
universe, he is also publishing in England following a decade that saw an explosion in vernacular English medical treatises. Does Donne really intend to question the medical theories of Paracelsus, or does he include the Swiss-German iatrochemical alchemist for the potentially entertaining wackiness of Theophrastic theology?

These questions must be explored through the actions and characters presented in *Ignatius*, that defiantly ecstatic thought experiment framed entirely as an out-of-body experience. Copernicus, brought before Lucifer, petitions to get into Hell. Lucifer says he’ll let Copernicus in if a Papal Decree is written up stating that the earth does not move. This is certainly topical and mildly interesting. Enter Paracelsius, who, presenting his case for admission to Hell, describes himself as “the organ and conduit” of Satan.

Paracelsus’s full name, which delighted the period with its mock-grandiosity, is presented: Philippus Aureolus Theophrastus Paracelsus Bombast of Hohenheim. This causes Lucifer to tremble, imagining the string of words to be an exorcism consisting of the Welsh/Irish translation of the first verse of John. (The verse, in the Geneva Bible, is “In the beginning was the Worde, and the Worde was with God and that Worde was God.”) It is possible that Donne is playing with the literary tradition of the Welsh butchering language, as seen through the character of Hugh Evans in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Once the apparent threat of being punished with passages of exorcism is

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31 Printed as “Bohenheim” in the 1611 English edition, and noted in the errata. The Facsimile Text Society Edition (Huntington HN60176) shows that a reader made this correction in the copy by hand. At least one reader, then, was familiar enough with Paracelsus already to know the correct spelling of the entire name.

32 The New Testament had been translated into Welsh in 1588. John 1:1 reads “YN y dechzeuad yzeodd y gair, a’r gair oedd gyd a Duw, a Duwo-edd y gair.” One can imagine Donne’s delight.
defused, when Lucifer “understood that it was but the webbe of his name, hee recollected himself, and raising himself upright,” asks Paracelsus what message he might deliver “to the great Emperor Sathan, Lucifer, Belzebub, Leviathan, Abbadon.” Lucifer thus emulates Paracelsus, in a potentially humorous attempt not to be outdone, with six proper names. Once the two have established their connection, Paracelsus begins to present his case for why he should be allowed admission into Hell for being an “Innovator.”

Paracelsus, self-proclaimed organ and conduit of Lucifer, presents his argument in four parts. First, Paracelsus claims to have brought medicine into contempt—almost to the point of destruction. His second achievement is that he prevented certainty by promoting deadly experimentation, claiming “my uncertain, ragged, and unperfect experiments” produced many “carkases.” Next he claimed to know a cure for pox (syphilis), “lest I should deterre any from their licentiousnesse.” (Whether he truly had the cure and concealed it, or whether the claim was false and fostered vain hopes does not matter: his intent to promote license through medical authority is the main accomplishment.) The fourth and final item of his curriculum vitae is that he has rendered poisons less offensive but just as effective. Thus, in sum, he has destroyed medicine, killed healthy people, claimed to cure syphilis for the sole purpose of promoting sexual vice, and made poison taste like candy.

Ignatius’ response to these four points is initially positive. He begins by complimenting Paracelsus on his great work on the homunculus, especially as it pertained to learning about the possibility of physical immortality. Attempting to alchemically produce the homunculus makes Paracleus worthy of “a great officer of Lucifer” (25-26).
Ignatius then praises Paracelsus’ ignorant *Commentaries* on Scripture, which caused much error to the benefit of Hell. At this point, it seems that Donne is utilizing his ecstasy to thoroughly trash the Paracelsian movement. Iatrochemistry is poison. The name of Paracelsus is on par with that of Lucifer. Paracelsism is a toxic, murderous, heretical mutation of Donne’s two types of medicine—physical and spiritual. Anyone exposed to the natural philosophy or the Scriptural commentary will die in body and soul.

However, Donne has a larger program to execute in this work. He takes stabs at Paracelsus, but wields an enormous double-sided battle axe that he wishes to grind with the Jesuits. Ignatius turns in his praise of Hohenheim and one-ups each of the supposed achievements. “*Physicke*,” Loyola argues, “is a soft, and womanish thing” (27). Physic is not in itself deadly, and when it is, the Jesuits are just as effective as Paracelsus. Thus the Jesuits are also soft and womanish. The pope can use minerals and metals to kill (though this is not explained). In short, Paracelsus does not “truly deserve the name of an innovator, whose doctrine, Severinus and his other followers revere to the most ancient times” (29). Donne pays a backhanded compliment to the Paracelsian project here, asserting that the innovations are not entirely radical but occasionally find roots in ancient philosophies. The true innovators, Ignatius implies, are the Jesuits, who have no philosophical or legitimate foundation in the past. What does it mean when Donne says that Paracelsus (or even Copernicus) is not as Hell-worthy as Ignatius, who is second in command to Lucifer? Healy claims that there are only two major charges against the Jesuits, “that the Jesuits are avid innovators and anti-monarchists” (xxxvii). Perhaps the
Jesuit “innovation” can be understood as nearly equivalent to Lucifer’s rebellion against God: the supreme arrogance of assuming power.

Ultimately, Paracelsus is granted limited access. He is allowed to govern Hell’s “homicide-Phisitians,” the “Princes which shall be made away by poison in the midst of their sins,” and “women tempted by paintings and face-physicke” (29-30). Machiavelli, also among the appellants for a leadership position in Hell, takes umbrage:

> It grieves me, and makes me ashamed, that I should be ranked with this idle and Cymaerical Copernicus, or this cadaverous vulture,

> *Paracelsus*…yet I can better endure the rashness and fellowship of Paracelsus, than the other: because hee having beene conveniently practiced in the butcheries and mangling of men. (34-35)

Machiavelli appreciates Paracelsus for his ability to poison princes. This is consistent with the contemporary English literary representation of Machiavelli as a regicide. Richard (Duke of Gloucester) famously soliloquizes on King Edward as “the murderous Machiavel” (3 Henry 6 3.2.193). Christopher Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta* begins with a prologue spoken by Machiavelli as a back-from-the-dead mouthpiece who admits his own “name is odious” (line 5). This zombie-Machiavelli gloats that his followers commit murder through poisoning to ascend ladders of power (even blasphemously suggesting they could even “attain / To Peter’s chair” (lines 11-12)), demonstrating justifiable regicide through examples of Caesar and Phalaris. Thus presenting Paracelsus as a “poysoner of princes” places him in admittedly (though perhaps satirically) bad company with Machiavelli. The English memory of Machiavelli is as a loathsome and deceptive
regicide-monger. Machiavelli and Paracelsus are thus, through political machinations and chemical preparations, Regicides. Considering its publication only a handful of years after the failed Gunpowder Plot of 1605, Ignatius would certainly ignite further anti-Catholic sentiments in its target audience, perhaps conflating the character Ignatius of Loyola as complicit with Machiavelli and Paracelsus in their regicidal tendencies.

Nearly two-thirds of the way through Ignatius, after Machiavelli has been denied residence in Lucifer’s most inner sanctum, Donne pauses to reframe the narrative. It seems almost as if Donne is bored by observing a scene in Hell, wherein popes and Jesuits are exposed as active regicidal agents of evil. There is no room for what Helen White described in her reading of the Devotions, “that object of perennial curiosity, himself” (as in Frost 13). What, Donne implies through his interruption, about me? Donne insists on reminding us about his extended ecstatic experience—that his soul is witnessing the entirety of the action portrayed in the work—and gruesomely drags the reader’s attention to the possibility that something nasty might happen to his abandoned body:

Truly I thought this Oration of Ignatius very long: and I began to thinke of my body which I had so long abandoned, lest it should putrifie, or grow mouldy, or bee buried; yet I was loath to leave the stage, till I saw the play ended. (63)

Even when the artifice of an out-of-body narration requires Donne to leave it behind, he cannot let go of his body. Donne’s unrelenting dualism fixates on the spiritual when in the physical world, and reaches back toward the flesh once the soul has gone elsewhere.
He suffers a constant magnetism of two-ness carried through the poetry: “The Good Morrow,” “The Sunne Rising,” “The Relic,” “The Exstasie,” and others demonstrate his pathological need for keeping the complete set intact. The bed must retain its two bodies. The world consists only of the two of us. Two bodies are present in one grave. The very idea that Donne is monadic—a single soul, existing entirely devoid of the body—makes him nervous enough to interrupt katabasis. Only Donne would interrupt an ecstatic Hell trip by asking himself if he might have body odor. It is worth noticing that Ignatius had recently said that in Hell, a different type of haruspicy from the Roman was practiced: “wee consider not the entrails of Beasts, but the entrails of souls, in confessions” (63). It is possibly ironic, then, that Donne’s Devotions a decade later can accurately be described as mimicking his antagonist: the entrails of both Donne’s soul and body are laid out for consideration.33

All of Donne’s anatomies, uses of new or old medicine, and ecstatic experiences (alchemical or otherwise) are presented with himself as the main object of exploration, himself as physician, himself as patient, and himself as audience. Trevor’s characterization of Donne supports this understanding: “Throughout his life, in writings that cross genres and decades, Donne circles around his own interests and characteristics because these qualities make him who he is: inexhaustibly interesting to himself as a

33 Margaret Healy’s chapter on “The Humoral-Paracelsian Body” provides highly illuminating passages from John Calvin’s The Institution of the Christian Religion (1536) and its presentation of the close relationship between spiritual and physical health—or more accurately—sickness (43-49). “In the seventeenth century the valorization of suffering, and of regimen to improve the soul, was not restricted to Calvinist writings. The importance of knowing the state of one’s body, of reading it like a text and applying the appropriate medicine, is explicated very fully in John Donne’s Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions” (47). That Donne sees himself as his own spiritual diagnostician also has a flavor of Arminianism through his choice to work on behalf of his own salvation.
melancholic scholar” (115). Perhaps it is due to his thoroughness as a scholar that Donne seems incapable of creating truly repulsive one-sided villains in hell: his own later work mimics his criticism of Loyolan confession, and “With Paracelsus as well as Copernicus, Donne has a great deal of sympathy. For this reason, his irony is not very successful. We know that he found Paracelsus’ attack on organized medicine refreshing” (Healy “Introduction” xxxi). Donne’s metaphysical exercises have gone beyond wit and wordplay, into a sort of enlightened mental dimension where multiple opposing realities are possible and present. Jesuit confession is at once both an echo of Lucifer’s overreaching ambition and a model for Donne to express his own spiritual shortcomings. The innovations of Paracelsus are deadly and curative medicine. Donne can be in his body and outside of it. Donne’s body is entirely separate from his soul, but it must suffer to elevate the soul. It makes sense at this point, before the current study devolves into a self-fulfilling or apology for the complex and contradictory metaphysics, to discuss Johnson’s criticism of the metaphysical poets:

But wit, abstracted from its effects upon the hearer, may be more rigorously and philosophically considered a kind of Discordia concors; a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike. Of wit, thus defined, they have more than enough. The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together; nature and art are ransacked for illustrations, comparisons and allusions; their learning instructs, and their subtlety surprises; but the reader
commonly thinks his improvement dearly bought, and, though he sometimes admires, is seldom pleased.

It is true that Donne draws from seemingly any source for illustration and comparison. We see alchemical laboratory materials and processes in a garden; micro- and macrocosmic expansions and contractions in a bedroom; a young dead girl is the world’s panacea (even though there is no such thing as health); a poem itself is a dead body, open on the table, succumbing to putrefaction. Donne would most likely agree to the general process laid out by Johnson (but without the pejorative tone). We should defend Donne from the last point, that the reader “is seldom pleased.” Being shown disparate ideas, objects, and illustrations engages the reader in a rewarding game of intertextuality within Donne’s work and among other writers: it is a game of intellectual history that can be pleasing (and frustrating) in its slipperiness. The ultimate pleasure for the reader is realizing that Donne, always dying, has become his own disease: “It seems curious that Donne, who was less of a sick man than Herbert and less of a physician than Vaughan, should be a more habitual employer of medical allusions than they” (Allen 341). Donne employs, or rather, deploys, an arsenal of medical allusion throughout his works not simply as a metaphysical trick or a violent yoking-together of dissimilar ideas, but because sickness is the idea that he sees in all contexts: disease makes the world go round. The body has no health, only neutrality (of which the latter is never seen). The soul strives for health but never seems to overcome its inevitable sickness.

John Donne would have enjoyed the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle as a scientific model for the process (and futility?) of healing the soul. Detecting an electron
allows one to know only its location at the precise moment of detection. This act interferes with the electron’s velocity, making its future trajectory and location unknowable. Donne can report on the relative health of his soul, locating it moment by moment, but each reflection, each meditation, alters its course. If he were to ever locate his soul in a realm or condition of health (or neutrality), that very act would infect it with the self-deception of being without sin. Donne’s body will go downward. He insists that his soul must go upward. If body and soul come together at the end, Donne’s spirituality has failed. Thus his ecstatic writings are living exercises preparing his body and soul to go their separate intended directions at death.
Chapter Six

Serious Diligence: Burton, Bacon, and the Desire for Progress

“Robert Burton’s Melancholy, like mercury loose upon a table, eludes capture.”

(Lange 83).

The early 1620s were the years of the self-diagnosing patient. As Donne’s
Devotions (1623) demonstrated a spiritual inventory and diagnosis brought on by
physical illness, Robert Burton’s (1577-1640) Anatomy of Melancholy (1st ed. 1621; 5th
ed. 1638) was occasioned as a way of understanding his own melancholic affliction. In
the introductory section titled “Democritus to the Reader,” Burton explains how keeping
busy is the best treatment for melancholy, while idleness is the best way to feed and
worsen the condition. By immersing himself in the vast project of exploring literature on
his affliction, Burton is undergoing a cure (or at least not getting any worse).
Cataloguing and interpreting nearly to exhaustion all previous thought on melancholy
performs the triple task of treating his own ailment, educating himself on the topic, and
sharing his discoveries with his audience. It is hard to ignore the irony that a man so well
read as Burton would choose study as the occupation to keep him busy: most of the
literature on melancholy specifically identifies excessive study as the cause of
melancholy—a position famously visualized in Durer’s engraving Melencolia I (1514).
That the Anatomy went into five editions (each expanded on the last) between 1623 and
1638 is either testament to the success of Burton’s initial hypothesis or evidence of its
failure.
Burton’s purported lifelong affliction with melancholy gained some potential documentary support nearly forty years ago. There has always been a gap in Burton’s biography between 1593 and 1599: he does not seem to have been an active student at Oxford, and he does not seem to have been actively employed. Barbara H. Traister brought to light that Simon Forman, the astrologer-physician of London (whose observations on the physician in Macbeth appear in the second chapter of this study), wrote in his casebook of consulting a twenty-year-old named Robert Burton in the summer of 1597. Traister is quick to acknowledge that a man of the same name and age as the author of the Anatomy (and the fact that we seem to need to fill a gap in Burton’s formal enrollment in school) is “at best circumstantial” (67). However, it is intriguing to see that over the course of five patient visits, the physician’s diagnosis of young “Robert Burton” is melancholy. It is also convincing that Burton would seek out a physician known for astrological diagnoses rather than uroscopical—a preference that Burton himself acknowledges in the Anatomy. Traister concludes that ultimately the melancholic Robert Burton who visited Simon Forman “may well have been” our author (70).

In addition to Traister’s suggestions, there are two more circumstances (which of course are by no means definitive) that are worth considering. The first is Burton’s definition of quackery (which we will see below), which includes the amassing of wealth by the physician. The combination of Forman’s wealth and Burton’s continued suffering of melancholy may make for a bitter combination in the author. Secondly, Forman experienced repeated persecutions by the medical establishment, being called out by both the Barber-Surgeons and the College of Physicians (who fined him repeatedly) for
operating without proper licensure during the 1590’s (Bamborough 40-41). It is noteworthy that the Robert Burton who visited Forman was not bothered by the physician’s unlicensed operation.

Such an extended exercise as the *Anatomy of Melancholy* demonstrates a frustration with the scholastic, Galenist, and conservative medical establishment in Elizabethan and early Jacobean England. Focused on old models of formal schooling and—more importantly—licensure and control of the healing trade, the colleges of physicians were spending more and more time asserting control over professional jurisdiction and defending their ways than they were adjusting practice to welcome newer philosophies. Burton, heavily scholastic himself, is certainly not an iconoclast. Nor does he call for revolution in education, theory, or practice. By creating a work of such breadth and depth, Burton seems to introduce a more modern sense of medical specialization. He takes the model of Vesalius’ attention to anatomical minutiae and applies it to the twin bodies of previous writings on melancholy and the affliction of melancholy itself. The very title suggests vast potential for other medical writers, armchair or otherwise: there might be careful, exhaustive, analytical *Anatomy* for each separate disease. The vastness of Burton’s project shows how he (in the spirit of his contemporaries including Bacon, who we will see later), is considering the value of not

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34 In this sense, Burton’s undertaking is almost Galenic in its execution. In his *Method of Medicine*, Galen repeatedly argues against the Rationalist school of medicine—with its focus on understanding disease through critical thinking and imagining the invisible minutiae of the body—in favor of the Empirical approach. The latter placed significance on direct experience and observation of the practicing physician: through physical interaction with disease and patients, the physician gains a base of knowledge that he can build on and apply in the future. Burton is doing this through his attention to the bodies of texts as well as a self-awareness of his own melancholic body.
just a few elements, but large swaths of the newer philosophies. He is quick to quote and slow to judge: like the best food critic, Burton will try anything twice.

Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy* provides rich insights for various flavors of reception that chemical medicine received in the earlier seventeenth century. That Burton was well-read in Paracelsus is evident from the copious references to his works and other writers’ receptions and revisions of Paracelsian ideas. Gibson and Madan’s catalogue of Burton’s books contributed to the Bodleian and to Christ’s College libraries includes several texts by Paracelsus and other chemical enthusiasts—as well as texts by their detractors. The tension among these books on the shelf plays out in the *Anatomy*, with Burton’s ultimate sympathies aligning with moderation: chemical medicine has made positive contributions to the art since the mid-sixteenth century, but it is not without its faults and dangers.

When projecting his own Utopia in his lengthy “Democritus to the Reader,” Burton includes the “alchemists, physicians, artists, and philosophers, that all arts and sciences may sooner be perfected and better learned” (99). Burton appends a note to alchemists—the only career-path distinguished in such a way—to explain that they are included “Not to make gold, but for matters of physic.” Transmutational, exoteric chrysopoetic alchemy is out, but Burton accepts and endorses the chemical exploration and production of medicines, especially as intimately associated with alchemical processes. He removes the tone of failure Donne insinuates toward the alchemist’s “pregnant pot,” and retains the medicine as an intentional and beneficial byproduct rather than a self-justified explaining-away of an accident.
Burton acknowledges that some ailments have supernatural causes, and thus cannot be cured by any type of physic, chemical or otherwise, quoting Paracelsus on the necessity for spiritual diseases to be spiritually cured (1.179). Bacon would not acknowledge this limitation, as he seems to leave spirituality out of the realm of medicine: Donne would agree, but certainly would not use Paracelsus’ own words as evidence. We have seen from the Devotions the insatiable thirst for validation from scripture, and Ignatius has put Paracelsus in company too dangerous for him to be employed as spiritual advisor. Chemical medicine doesn’t fail in Burton’s example—nor does traditional Galenic humoral treatment—rather, remedies supplied by man simply do not apply to the spiritual paradigm. In this taxonomy of disease, Burton is a clear Paracelsian dualist. Burton goes a step further than spiritual, into the supernatural—a step Donne would never take.

In Part II of the Anatomy, dealing with Cure of Melancholy, Burton explores the debates concerning the roles which demons, witches, and other supernatural elements play in the treatment of disease. Paracelsus is included among others, who Burton seems to agree with, who argue for supernatural cure. 35 All examples of healing attributed to the intervention of saints, however, are “false fictions, or diabolical illusions, counterfeit miracles” (2.13). This has resonance in Paracelsus’ Four Treatises, specifically the treatise dealing with Nymphs, Sylphs, Pygmies, and other creatures, which the editor Henry Sigerist characterizes as a rare place in which Paracelsus “opposed not the

35 Donne would disagree, as he states in Prayer IV of the Devotions that there can be no bodily health brought about by witchcraft.
physicians but the theologians” (221). Both authors place strong importance on truth and have no patience for hypocrisy: one cannot deny certain fields of natural philosophy and then invent (or innovate) a veneration of saints or worship of relics. The supernatural has its place in physic, so long as man is not deluded into worshiping or attributing powers to a particular worldly power. Man must acknowledge that the divine has several mechanisms in place which allow him to discover the available cure. In the ecstatic Ignatius, Donne hyperbolically pillories Paracelsus for killing patients through experimentation, but never accuses him of quackery. In fact, for Burton, quackery would be defined as monetary pursuit, failure to listen, dishonesty, and use of magic or superstition or relics. Concerning astrology, our author had a well-known personal interest in the medical uses of the art, but seems to be very cautiously optimistic about asserting definitively which side of the astrology debate is correct. Just as he is vocally anti-Catholic, he may be cautious of allowing Ficinian sympathies that, if allowed, would introduce demonic elements as well as astrologic and astronomic harmonies. (He has no problem, however, with strictly medical applications of Ficino’s astrology.) While Burton is not nearly so eager as Donne to continually and dramatically separate his mind and his body, the Anatomy remains a testament to the dualistic nature of man’s condition. As the health of both soul and body must be considered in each method of diagnosing and treating melancholy, Burton must be continually aware of the dangers posed by the way in which astrology crosses the boundaries of physical and spiritual. As Hartmann posits, “It should always be remembered that astral influences do not act directly upon the physical bodies of men and animals, but upon their vital essence, in which all elements
are contained” (154). This lack of control would be unappealing to such a type-A organizer as Burton.

Always willing to consider multiple viewpoints, and rarely taking truly exclusive or judgmental positions, the Anatomy insists through its hundreds of pages of intricately outlined, subsectioned, manically organized body that the author must be continually in control. Such omniscient control over the information and its structure allows the author to see multiple viewpoints and sympathies on the table before him at once. Burton takes a surprisingly modern clinical approach, treating the players in the patient-doctor drama as dynamic individuals rather than typecast roles. Late sixteenth-century medical writers such as Clowes were largely inconsiderate of the common patient, treating him as a stubborn, concupiscent, untruthful body that can be read only by the superior trained medical expert. Non-medical writers of the period presented physicians as death incarnate. Like the Devotions, the Anatomy is written by the patient, not the physician. Burton takes a uniquely neutral position. The cure can only be effected through the proper attitudes and expectations of both patient and physician, which our author enumerates for the benefit of both parties. Once the stage is set to begin discussion of physical methods of cure, it is significant that the section “Concerning Physic” opens with the assertion that “Physick itself in the last place is to be considered; ‘for the Lord hath created medicines of the earth, and he that is wise will not abhor them’ (Ecclus.xxxviii, 4) and ‘of such doth the apothecary make a confection; etc. (verse 8)” (2.20). Consistent with those contemporaries and sixteenth-century sources who publish on the positive aspects of chemical medicine, Burton takes the oft-cited passage from
Ecclesiasticus as irrefutable evidence and unbeatable defense for the existence and divine intentions behind chemical medicines. In this belief Burton again follows Paracelsus, as it allows for understanding “new” diseases as discoveries or mutations of old diseases rather than introductions, thus the “newness of syphilis results from a sexual licentiousness and an astral-constellation of Venus that ‘transmutes’ ‘old diseases’ into the new disease” (Weeks *Paracelsus* 137). This is subtly different from sixteenth-century physician and syphilitic Ulrich von Hutten’s depiction of syphilis, which is dependent upon astral influences to rain down a new fomite disease on the New World. The period’s syphilography tends to embrace the newness of syphilis rather than the transmutational model, pushing forward the twin new treatments of guaiacum and newly discovered treatments of mercury. Both treatments—but mercurial ones even more so—were often depicted as pure poison: it is not surprising that the disease may be killed by a treatment so powerful that it would often kill the patient first.

Burton then provides a list remarkably similar to Donne’s catalogue of sources for poison in “The Curse,” including “plants, metals, animals,” and acknowledges the dual nature of naturally occurring materials, of which “some good for one, hurtful to another, some noxious in themselves, corrected by art, very wholesome and good…and therefore left to be managed by discreet and skilful physicians, and thence applied to man’s use” (2.20). This view reflects what is perhaps the main tenet of chemical medicine—and which occurs later in Thomas Browne’s *Religio Medici* (1643):

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36 Donne quotes heavily from Ecclesiasticus in Expostulation IV of his *Devotions* (1624), to the conclusion that physic can be effective, but only in conjunction with the spiritual medicine of holy devotion.
The greatest Balsams do lie enveloped in the bodies of the most powerful Corrosives; I say moreover, and I ground upon experience, that poisons contain within themselves their own Antidote, and that which preserves them from the venom of themselves; without which they were not deleterious to others only, but to themselves also. (168-69)

In order to turn a hazardous material into curative medicine, man must apply the art of chemistry in such a way that the two forces are separated and then diluted to the correct dosage.

In this use of iatrochemistry, the chemist or physician becomes the agent of separation and purification of materials. Paracelsus called archeus the spagyric agent in man’s stomach which separated nutriment from excrement. The archeus is the model which works on both a microcosmic and a macrocosmic scale. The physician must behave as an external archeus of the patient, creating medicines that are all nutriment and no excrement. That is to say, the physician plays mimics the role of the stomach, the role of the alchemist, in separating the pure from the impure.

It is worth noting that Paracelsus did not deny categorically the existence of the humors. Although he is cast and understood as an iconoclast, the four humors and the tria prima (three elemental forces in the body) play their roles in both the sick and healthy body. They are still present in the body, but they behave differently than the traditional sealed humoral hydraulic system of balance, paucity, and excess. This is particularly relevant in the context of mental illness, the main subject of Burton’s *Anatomy* as well as Paracelsus’ *Diseases That Deprive Man of Reason*. While traditional Galenism attributes
mental illness to proportion and volume of the respective humors, both Burton and Paracelsus seem to agree that, while present, the humors alone are not symptomatic. When involved at all in the pathology of disease, they are secondary or tertiary players in the morbific game. The humors may even be interpreted as different in nature from the traditional black and yellow biles, blood, and phlegm: they may even mechanically interact with the brain, as in *Diseases That Deprive Man of Reason*, where one of the types of mental illness Paracelsus explores is mania (the other side of the melancholic coin). The entire process of the genesis and development of mania follows a set of alchemical interactions without once using the word *alchemy*:

> If the matter from which mania comes vibrates into chalk which dissolves in a very corrosive water, this corrosive solution sets the *humor vitae* afire, and this causes a separation of the rough from the fine. The fine parts are so sharp that they go up as far as they can, while the rough remain below.

(149)

The material is “sumblimated and distilled,” and undergoes “great heat.” Without being told specifically whether these are traditional humors or some other manifestation of internal fluids, we see that mental disease is caused not by the proportions but rather in the material, alchemical changes that the fluids undergo, and the various ways in which the fluids are distilled, titrated, calcined, and so on, into various newer subparticles. These new materials do not contribute to imbalance, but cause physical, mechanical damage due to “fine and sharp” pieces actually “touching particles of the brain” (149). While some medical authors use physical models as metaphorical illustration for
interactions that are more ethereal and vaporous in nature, Paracelsus describes what amounts to a battle-wound invisible from outside the body but just as physically tangible. This seems to be the type of newer iatrochemical theorizing that Burton wants to see in his ideal civilization: the alchemist is not focused on transmuting metals but rather on applying the laboratory process and understanding of materials as process rather than product that can allow for chemically derived healing in situations where Galenism has fallen short. After all, had borage and St. John’s Wort rebalanced Burton’s humors as they were supposed to, the entire *Anatomy of Melancholy* would have consisted of the title page illustration of those herbs along with three pages of text.

Paracelsus continues to show how mental diseases are not simply static conditions but dynamic and changing processes, just like the chemical changes that occasion the ailments. Once mania has set in, there is no simple rebalancing or bleeding that can rid the body of its malefic results: “Further, mania which sublimates and coagulates in the head makes worms grow there, due to the putrefaction of the light sublimation; sometimes there is an ulcer if too much hard substance is congealed, sometimes there is pus all through the head” (Paracelsus *Diseases* 150). As is patently obvious, the alchemical processes of sublimation, coagulation, putrefaction, and congelation (and even the generation of worms from the process) do not stop once disease has manifested: the wheels of the inner laboratory have been set in motion and the processes and relationships must be fully understood in order to both recognize the current state of the condition’s development and also to apply the correct processes and treatments in order to reverse or undo the damage. Mania is on alchemical autopilot; disease is not static, but
a Rube Goldberg contraption with many moving parts, igniting flames, and chain reactions. Each stage of the disease must be understood and treated differently—there is no longer one simple imbalance that awaits correction. Mental illness is a mechanical and chemical process that moves persistently toward perfection of the disease: death.

The ideal medicine, of course, is the panacea—not only is this theoretical elixir entirely poison-free, but it also has the power of influencing other chemicals with which it comes into contact. Gold, the most pure and perfected metal, would naturally (or rather, through artifice) be capable of yielding the most pure medicine. Burton addresses the topic of the panacea early in Part 2: “Several prescripts and methods I find in several men, some take upon them to cure all maladies with one medicine, severally applied, as that panacea *aurum potabile* (liquid gold), so much controverted in these days” (2.21). He does not engage the debate at this time, over whether the panacea is possible (and since we are dealing with Burton we may imagine that he might not actually take one side over the other, but rather present each side through the words of others exclusively—typical of his hyperlogos-pansophic striving). It is obvious to today’s reader of early seventeenth-century literature that the panacea was on the minds of many: to have Burton say that he will address the “controverted” topic shows that the panacea was not merely a literary image, obscurantist alchemical metaphor, or abstraction, but that it should be taken seriously into consideration.

Which is exactly what Burton does 200 pages later. In Book 2, Section 4, Member 1, Subsection 4, the anti-Paracelsian tract of Erastus is brought out in the first sentence, railing against any use whatsoever of metals, minerals, or precious stones in
Burton moves away from Erastus with a subtle “but,” providing no direct commentary but instead enlisting a small army of authorities who assert the benefits of chemical medicine. It is not difficult to determine, once the subsection moves in an orderly fashion through all manner of gems and stones and their unquestionable powers to treat disease, toward which side of the debate our author leans.

Erastus seems, for Burton’s rhetorical purposes, to take on the role of devil’s advocate—the solitary voice calling out in unlikely opposition, providing an argumentative foil—with regard to *aurum potabile*. When “Most men say as much of gold and some other minerals as these have done of precious stones,” Erastus exhaustingly “still maintains the opposite part” (2.219). A battle of poets ensues, where the nay-sayer is associated with the entirely satirical (and witty) “at mihi plaudo simul ac nummos contemplor in arca.”

Burton, to move the pro-aurum agenda forward, quotes Chaucer: “For gold in physic is cordial, / Therefore he loved gold in special.” What does this do for Burton’s position? Is his use of Chaucer serious or satirical? Chaucer is, after all, the poster child for satirizing exoteric, chrysopoetic alchemy. The “Doctour of Phisik” described in the “General Prologue” to *The Canterbury Tales* is, however, “a verray, parfit practisour” (line 422). However, he also makes much money from selling medicines, thus potentially qualifying for at least one of Burton’s criteria for quackery. This may be outweighed by Burton’s likely attraction to how well-read the doctor is, since it takes six lines (429-34)

37 This witty pun on “chest” finds a corollary in Donne, who puns on the physical and emotive heart in the final lines of Elegie XI, “The Bracelet”: “Gold is restorative, restore it then: / But if from it thou beest loath to depart, / Because ‘tis cordiall, would twere at thy heart” (lines 112-14).
for Chaucer to list authorities which the pilgrim physician “wel knew.” For Burton, books outweigh gold. Perhaps the only way to understand the rhetorical purpose of Burton’s use of Chaucer is to continue through the passage on *aurum potabile*.

Erastus asserts that potable gold is “no better than poison” and he attacks “Paracelsus and his chemistical followers, as so many Promethei” (2.220). Burton either relates Erastus’ opinion or suggests his own that Paracelsus *brags* of gold’s contribution to both longevity and the panacea. Burton finally arrives at a compromise, as Erastus and Paracelsus “are both in extremes; the middle sort approve of minerals, though not in so high a degree.” The debate ends by quoting Matthiolus on the *aurum* and other chemical medicines, that “no man can be an excellent physician that hath not some skill in chemical distillations, and that chronic diseases can hardly be cured without mineral medicines” (2.221)—a sentiment Burton clearly agrees with. He seems ready for change.

Sir Francis Bacon’s *The Advancement of Learning* (1605) demonstrates an undeniable dissatisfaction with the status quo of medical knowledge and practice. In addition to general stagnation of medical science, his criticisms include deficiencies in the study of anatomy, physicians whimsically changing or overcomplicating their prescriptions, mountebanks duping the gullible, physicians ignoring the seemingly incurable, and “the discontinuance of the ancient and serious diligence of Hippocrates” (10.4). This last phrase must be placed in its appropriate context: Bacon does not address any actual Hippocratic diagnosis, prognosis, or regimen, and does not embrace the humoral or Galenic/Hippocratic schools of thought. Bacon is lamenting how his contemporaries do not labor to record detailed patient histories that would be helpful for
other physicians. No one is bothering to write the narrative of the onset of a disease, what preceded it, how it developed and came to a crisis, and how it was or was not cured. The deficiency of close record keeping prevents advancement in the medical sciences.

The ultimate record of the human body is, of course, the body itself. Bacon argues that the main debate over the body should not be whether or not disease has humoral causation: “they quarrel many times with the humours which are not in fault; the fault being in the very frame and mechanique of the part” (10.5). Looking into the body, we will see the sort of individuality that is obvious in a person’s outward appearance. There are “passages and pores” that are “shut and latent in dead bodies, though they be open and manifest in live” (10.5). Through vivisection of animals, the close anatomization of those recently deceased by known causes, and meticulous histories and inventories of the “devastations of inward parts” for each person who dies of an illness, anatomy might begin to advance. The problem is not humoral imbalance: the problem is a broken understanding of anatomy.

At the risk of sounding glib, we might say that such criticism of the shortcomings of contemporary medical practice is itself demonstrable proof of a truly Paracelsian mind. Bacon’s uses of Paracelsus proper are, of course, complicated. Whenever he seems to upraise Theophrastus in one area, he is careful to bring him down in another. The seesaw motion might seem to suggest neutrality on average, but the noticeable volume and attention given to Paracelsus proves that Bacon is taking him seriously. Of course, Paracelsus himself is not always the true focus: Bacon refers to the Paracelsian school, as well as the writing of “Theophrastus Paracelsus, eloquently reduced into an harmony by
the pen of Severinus the Dane” (8.3). In addition to Severinus getting praise for making Paracelsus legible, Bacon presents some concepts that are wholeheartedly embraced by the Paracelsian enterprise, but are not named as such.

One of these medical concepts is respect (albeit limited) for the folk-medical experience of old women, who “are more happy many times in their cures than learned physicians, because they are more religious in holding their medicines” (10.8). This quotation is intentionally taken out of context to demonstrate how any positive treatment of medicine is presented only as a punchline in a backhanded compliment. The context for this quotation is a lengthy critique of the seemingly random experimentation which many physicians change the ingredients and applications of their medicines. There is no way, Bacon argues, that pharmacy can be effective when doctors use radically different recipes not only regionally, but also locally, for the same ailments. This reduces the medicines to “general intentions of purging, opening, comforting, altering, and not much appropriate to particular diseases” (10.8). Thus the line about the old women, which also includes that always-negatively-connoted “empirics,” is meant as an insult to institutional medicine, and is a perhaps unintentional compliment to the wisdom of old women who religiously stick to their traditional medicine recipes.

In the next subsection, 10.9, Bacon makes two claims: mineral medicines work, and balneology is truly effective. Of course, cautious Bacon must present these ideas through the shortcomings of others. He would be quite tiresome at a party, complaining about rationally solved problems without necessarily acting on them:
In preparation of medicines I do find strange, specially considering how
mineral medicines have been extolled, and that they are safer for the
outward than inward parts, that no man hath sought to make an imitation
by art of natural baths and medicinable fountains: which nevertheless are
confessed to receive their virtues from minerals: and not so only, but
discerned and distinguished from what particular mineral they receive
tincture, as sulphur, vitriol, steel, or the like: which nature, if it may be
reduced to compositions of art, both the variety of them will be increased,
and the temper of them will be more commanded. (10.9)

By better understanding healing waters and creating them in the laboratory, the quantity
and quality will benefit mankind. The healing bath finds a precedent in Sonnet 154,
ending the entire Shakespearean sequence on a Galenic image with a Petrarchan twist.
The “fairest votary” of the nymphs takes love’s weapon and

This brand she quenchéd in a cool well by,
Which from Love’s fire took heat perpetual,
Growing a bath and healthful remedy
For men disease; but I, my mistress’ thrall,

Came there for cure, and this by that I prove:

Love’s fire heats water, water cools not love. (Lines 9-14)

In addition to the typical interpretations of venereal disease, this passage demonstrates a
Galenic understanding of love-sickness: since love is a dykrasia of heat, it cannot be
treated with more heat. It must be cooled. We might suggest that Shakespeare’s
balneology understands the addition of love’s (permanently quality-altering) heat to the
water as a sort of mineral addition: not only the temperature of the water has changed, but something inherent in its composition. Of course, the sonnet is a thought-exercise on love and its physiological effects, but it moves beyond the mental sphere into the physical.

Bacon is tentative about giving praise or credit to any individual for their ideas concerning iatrochemistry. Is this because *The Advancement of Learning* comes so early in the seventeenth century? Paracelsus’ ideas were so poorly expressed in England at the moment that it took Severinus to bring the good parts to light.38 Bacon hopes that serious study of mineral interaction will provide insights for health and youth of man, but is wary of parts of the alchemical program—especially the spiritual elements. Bacon seems convinced that the more practical, material applications are good in theory and that mankind may in the future see good come of them. Elsewhere, in the context of the use of mathematics, Bacon asserts this need for relevance: “So that as tennis is a game of no use in itself, but of great use in respect it maketh a quick eye and a body ready to put itself into all postures” (*Advancement* 8.2). There is a difference, then, between the actual exercise and the ways in which it might have positive influence: the significance lies not in the means, but the ends. In this sense, Bacon embodies not only what Debus terms the “English Compromise” regarding Paracelsianism, but also the separation of physical medicine from spiritual medicine: a separation which, as we have discussed above, would be impossible for Shakespeare, Spenser, or Donne.

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We can see a separation of the tennis match from the quick eye—the physical medicine from the spiritual medicine—in the casebooks of Shakespeare’s son-in-law, the physician John Hall (1575-1635). Published posthumously, his Select Observations on English Bodies provides brief descriptions of his patients and very detailed recipes for his prescriptions during the first few decades of the seventeenth century. Hall married Shakespeare’s daughter, which is why Harriet Joseph republished the casebooks on the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare’s birth. The casebooks teach or show us very little about Shakespeare, and it is important not to get distracted with the idea that they might. Harriet Joseph gets a bit carried away in her whitewashing of the general perception of physicians in the period, focusing on the ideas that they were “high on the social scale,” and received ubiquitous “esteem and respect” (Joseph 20). She suggests that benign healers such as Cerimon in Pericles may be modeled on Hall. Joseph overlooks the significant attitudes in contemporary English press ranging from skepticism to ridicule, including John Fletcher’s 1621 contribution to the language itself. The Oxford English Dictionary credits Fletcher’s Thierry and Theodoret with the distinction of establishing “clyster” as a slang synonym for doctor: “What’s that to you, Ye dose, you powdered pigsbones, rhubarb glister?” Calling someone a rhubarb enema is a strange example of esteem and respect.

The true perception of medical practice certainly includes the two extremes as well as lots of middle ground in between. We must not glamorize for the sake of the title, nor can we disparage for the same reason. We also must not use the casebooks as a lever for prying out some connection with Shakespeare the playwright or even the man. What
the casebooks provide are actual patient histories, diagnoses, and prescriptions for
treatment. The prose is focused on the patients, their symptoms, and the recipes for
simple or compounded medicines: there is no debate, dogma, or theoretical axe-grinding.
What we find is a conscientious doctor who seems genuinely concerned with returning
his patients to health, while keeping records that would have pleased Bacon.\textsuperscript{39}

The \textit{Select Observations} demonstrates a prescriptive approach that is largely
herbal. Just as Burton knows, Hall uses borage in a compound for melancholy. Roots,
flowers, herbs, broths, wine, plasters, and changes in diet make up the majority of the
prescriptions, largely for Galenic balancing of hot and cold, moist and dry. There are
also conspicuously iatrochemical processes and materials interspersed with the herbalism.
These chemical approaches are not singled out as unique or groundbreaking, but blend in
seamlessly with the herbalism—they are often, in fact, compounded with herbs. Hall
makes no special show about including them. Quercetanus (Joseph DuChesne), the
French alchemical physician, is listed matter-of-factly as one of the sources of
prescription for certain conditions. If one were to read only Hall’s casebooks, one would
have no idea there were professional debates raging at the time.

One of the herbal cures is the case of the unfortunate fifteen-year-old bedwetter
John Emes, who was prescribed a breakfast-time egg-sized suppository of crocus and
dried cock’s windpipe (Hall 11). The treatment shows immediate success, although we
may wonder whether that is due to the desiccating nature of the herbal treatment or

\textsuperscript{39} The style of Hall’s casebook closely emulates the casebook style demonstrated by Hippocrates in
“Epidemics I” and “Epidemics III.”
whether the threat of such a routine was enough to cure young Master Emes of sleep altogether. Herbalism is combined with conspicuously chemical—and alchemical—treatment without overt reference to the art in the case of fifty-year-old Mrs. Beats. Her asthma is treated with an herbal draught followed by what reads like a recipe for Provencal snail quiche cooked over a “BM,” shorthand for Bain-Marie—the alchemical Marian Bath that provides long, slow heat (Hall 6-7). Mr. Kempson received a compounded herbal-mercurial clyster in addition to lapis bezoar in a posset (Hall 26). In 1631, young teenager Mary Comb’s emmenagogue included drachms covered with gold (Joseph 131-33).

Perhaps the most noteworthy and thoroughly iatrochemical treatments is for a feverish Catholic priest. Hall prepares a powder for the priest to use as a mealtime condiment. The ingredients include coral, jacinth, smardines (smaragdite), pearls, garnets, rubies, and gold leaf (Hall 28-29). These chemical and metallic medicines are compounded for their cordial and iatrochemical properties, leaving all herbal ingredients for other stages of treatment. Thus, while some authors are busy writing and debating, at least one physician is busy doing. John Hall has learned from his writing and experience that neither traditional nor newfangled treatments are uniquely perfect, but that each of the approaches has something to offer in daily practice, if not theory, of medicine. His pragmatism protects him from the extremes in his applied natural philosophy.

Part of Bacon’s concern in The Advancement of Learning for perceived Paracelsian spiritual extremism is that “it hath been extremely set on foot of late time by the school of Paracelsus, and some others, that have pretended to find the truth of all
natural philosophy in the scriptures; scandalizing and traducing all other philosophy as
heathenish and profane” (25.16). It seems that by 1605 the “school of Paracelsus” is
running the risk of using in too extreme and limited a manner the Paracelsian theory of
natural philosophy’s two books. It is dangerous for man to focus too much on God’s
teachings of physical nature and to ignore the moral and divine uses the scriptures offer
to the reflective and imaginative reader.

Burton will go so far as to include alchemists in his personal utopia. Unlike
Bacon, he does not harbor concern for the effectiveness of prose published, but rather for
the presumably very real and very effective medicines these practitioners are capable of
producing, currently. This may be a shift in attitude over the intervening twenty years
between the Advancement and the Anatomy, but a close reading of all five editions of
Burton’s work would be required to date the development of his iatrochemical aesthetic.
(This would be a fascinating undertaking.) Burton shares, to a lesser degree, a Baconian
wariness of Paracelsian spirituality: not all diseases should have a spiritual cause, and it
may be dangerous to expand an understanding of human spirituality into the material
world, i.e. through hylozooism. Bacon demonstrates repeatedly, in varied contexts, how
disease has physical causes. In his essay “Of Dispatch” (1612), he asserts the difference
between doing something quickly and doing something well or efficiently in the context
of diplomacy. His illustration is medical, bordering on the alchemical through what
seems like a clear understanding of the Paracelsian digestive archeus and the production
of a morbific ens: “It is like that which the physicians called predigestion, or hasty
digestion; which is sure to fill the body full of crudities and secret seeds of diseases” (as
in Jardine *Hostage* 46-47). In short, while Bacon cautiously admits that alchemy teaches us about material nourishment and youth, Burton sees chemical medicine as the *only* method of curing certain diseases and seems to suggest the idea of “better living through chemistry” more than 300 years before the idea is satirized in America.

Burton, of course, spends more time dealing with herbal remedies for treating melancholy, promoting borage and St. John’s Wort on the title page of most editions of his work—suggesting, from the very beginning of the many editions of printed text, a variation of Cordelia’s line: he calls upon all of the *published* virtues of the earth. He is not an exclusive Paracelsian by any means, but he does not evince the caution of Bacon or even of Sennert, who thought chemistry to be valuable, but “should not be considered the foundation of medicine” (Debus *Chemical Philosophy* 195). Ultimately, by combining Bacon’s fascination with the new chemistry’s applications in understanding the material qualities of youth and Burton’s insistence upon its real medical uses, we come up with one complete alchemist: one who acknowledges that “alchemy had a special role to play in medicine both through pharmacy and through more esoteric research to prolong human life” (Debus *Chemical Philosophy* 4). While this quote from Debus is taken strictly from the context of alchemy and not a discussion of these authors, it suggests that Bacon’s caution in avoiding the spiritual side of Paracelsianism is perhaps undermined by his fascination with youth and aging—characterized by Debus as the more esoteric of iatrochemistry’s applications.

Donne is perhaps the most interesting author to contrast with these contemporaries. As we saw in his *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*, the spiritual
semi-autobiographical pseudo-penitential psalm reflecting upon his very real illness of 1623, he makes use of Ecclesiasticus to support the existence of medicinal materials within the earth and man’s divine prerogative to make use of them. Yet the actual treatment Donne receives from his doctors is only briefly mentioned and seems to consist of traditional (Galenic, herbal) purgatives. Despite all his seeming fascination with new science, Donne chooses a medieval approach for real ailments. Chemical medicines are certainly not extolled (or invoked, even), but the use of the iatrochemists’ strongest Scriptural support (Ecclesiasticus) shows familiarity not just with Scriptural hermeneutic, but the contemporary debate’s terms of engagement and defense.

Just as Bacon shies away from Paracelsus’ spirituality, he has no use for spiritual healing, that we can see. While Bacon wants to break away from the faulty assumptions and mindless promotion of superstitious or unfounded expressions of truth, Donne’s Devotions is almost defiantly medieval within its very modern shell of Augustinian introspection combined with celestial geometries. Bacon and Donne may differ here: “Wherein the school of Paracelsus, and the disciples of pretended natural magic have been so intemperate, as they have exalted the power of the imagination to be much one with the power of miracle-working faith” (Advancement 11.3). While Donne would not associate the power of imagination with “pretended natural magic,” it seems that Bacon does not prescribe to Donne’s somewhat Arminian approach to the role of the individual participating in one’s own salvation, particularly in moments of physical and therefore spiritual duress.
Donne and Bacon agree on equally large conceptual understandings of the body. Bacon asserts that “it cannot be denied but that the body of man of all other things is of the most compounded mass” (*Advancement* 10.1). Donne echoes this as we saw in an earlier chapter, when he says he is a little world—man contains everything that is in the larger world and, in addition, contains a soul, making him ultimately the body that has more elements than any other. This is perhaps why they both disagreed with the supposedly monumental 1616 *Pharmacopoeia*: man is more complicated than can be understood by a list of herbal simples and compounds. While Burton’s skepticism of the completeness in the current state of medicine is formal and mechanical, Bacon and Donne base their skepticism in their understanding of man’s complexly compounded body. Yet while Donne seems to find a satisfaction in his own fluid and sometimes paradoxical theories—the inverse relationship of the health (or neutrality) of the soul and the body—we might think that for Bacon, lacking the spiritual focus of health, nothing could ever be good enough.

Stephen A. McKnight’s recent work on Bacon convincingly argues against scholarship from the 1990s that Bacon’s concerns were largely secular and nationalistic. McKnight demonstrates Bacon’s vision of the Jacobean monarchy and the current age specifically as “one of apocalyptic promise” (475) due to the pursuit of natural philosophy as a means of reclaiming our prelapsarian knowledge of the divine. Due to the dual pursuit of divine and natural discovery, “exploring creation and knowledge of nature cannot be sinful” (474). Advancement of knowledge in *New Atlantis*, a utopian Christianity, is focused on religious devotion and the relief of suffering. To that end, it is
noteworthy that the Bensalemites, under the rule of a Jacobean-paralleled King Salomon, use experiments to “produce new artificial metals that are used for curing diseases” (479). John Hall, it will be remembered, simply did this rather than entering the debate (or creating an imaginary utopia) to determine whether it should be done. Bacon’s utopian purification and narrowing of alchemical pursuits into productive iatrochemistry is echoed in Burton’s ideal community.

Bacon is anti-mythology, but likes overt Christian allegory such as Spenser:

For Bacon, the subtext of the fable transcends the scientist’s ‘World-as-it-is,’ without losing credibility, and interprets actual experience morally and aesthetically in a more intelligible form. Fablemaking helps Bacon clarify the scientist’s relation to God and the world. (Simon 45)

In Salomon’s House, “scientific method as a sign of grace” (Simon 43). While Bacon wants to question the methods of learning and application—to break away from faulty assumptions and mindless promotion of superstitions or unfounded expressions of truth, Donne’s Devotions is by comparison positively, resistantly medieval. Both are concerned with the ways in which new philosophies of celestial geometry may allow for the de-centering of God’s creation.

Donne’s secular poetry, closer in date of composition to Bacon’s Advancement, is often testing Copernicanism, alchemy, and iatrochemistry. However, the result is never to prove or disprove the truth or effectiveness of these sciences, but to test which field can provide him with the most appropriate vehicle for a metaphor. Bacon sees real
medical potential in chemical medicine arising from a cautious acceptance of the alchemical laboratory (as separated from its spirituality). Donne sees chemical medicine as a rich set of imagery that ultimately is surpassed by traditional Galenic treatments during real ailment. Donne’s real medicines, as seen in the Devotions, are spiritual and Galenic. It seems that he and Bacon are on the same page, according to one characterization of the author of New Atlantis: “He [Bacon] believes that scientific methodology enables man to perfect each task of interpreting nature for the glorification of God and the betterment of mankind” (Simon 44). Does Bacon use Paracelsus as a handy club to beat down faulty authority? Definitely not. He carefully evaluates of challenging and potentially revolutionary ideas. Even through the fable of Salomon’s scientific laboratory of a house in New Atlantis, Bacon shows that exploration and discovery are pursued—the actual scientific results—contrary to authority or otherwise—are not discussed. He is not quick to dismiss any particular authority, and is likewise not quick to write off the seemingly easily dismissible. They who appear to be most bizarre may in fact be rather necessary for advancing knowledge: some writers simply need a Severinus to make sense of them before we can judge the scientific value of the ideas.

Bacon sees real potential in iatrochemistry, as long as it divorces itself from spirituality. Burton sees iatrochemistry as the newest, best option for physical and emotional malady. Donne’s physical medicine is a medieval laxative; his metaphorical medicine is herbal, alchemical, and metaphysical; his spiritual medicine is Christ.

English writers are excited about this particular strain of scientific and medical speculation. What makes it so exciting for them? Iatrochemistry is a meeting-place for
issues of state, technological discoveries, and divinity. The ubiquity of contemporary
disease on such a massive scale demonstrates its own significance for concerns of
national military, economic, and cultural strength. Plague has devastating effects for
centuries and is continually recurring; the New World brings to Europe the discovery of
“new” disease as well as new cure. The combination of constant threat of epidemic and
the explosion of new syphilis opens the possibility for adjusting medical treatment
through necessary experimentation with emerging iatrochemistries. This redefinition of
materia medica, combined with questions of divine causation, material continuity since
Creation, the (im)possibility of newness, and man’s new role as manipulator of metals
and chemicals require reconciliation with the dogmas of religion and contagion theory.
Divinity and natural philosophy are yoked together as they have always been, but are
being put to work like never before thanks to the explosion in vernacular medical
publication. There is a growing dissatisfaction with the efficacy of traditional medical
practice, and its inability to adapt to new discoveries and more nuanced understandings of
disease and contagion. It seems that either the rules have changed, or the rules have been
misunderstood for years: ever since Adam’s fall from Paradise, something is broken, and
the authors need to determine what exactly needs fixing. Debate over repairs is
happening in English, by the English, on a massive scale.

It has been demonstrated by Edgar Duncan Hill, Stanton Linden, and others, that
alchemy changed the way poetry was written. New possibilities for metaphor and
imagery allowed skepticism and satire of the more bogus and dishonest parts of the
perceived role of the alchemist. Especially in Linden’s works, we can see the movement
from satire to serious consideration of the scientific possibilities (briefly), and then back to satire. What changes with iatrochemistry, specifically, is not a massive pan-poetical paradigm shift. The removal of transmutational chrysopoetic alchemy certainly eliminates the role of the duplicitous conman and refocuses the poets’ gaze on the possibilities of the pregnant pot. It allows authors to explore issues of disease, death, salvation, and dualistic cure in material—rather than merely spiritual—terms. It might be worthwhile considering the extent to which it would be accurate to say that man’s gaze moves from beyond the stars to below the earth’s surface. There might not be anything truly new under the sun, but there are still the forgotten elements that may be rediscovered there.

Death and disease are constantly being anatomized by new theories—death can be put off (by extending youth, in theory), and disease (generation, transmission, and treatment thereof) can be better understood through externalized mechanical models rather than a closed hydraulic Galenic humoralism. Concepts of ancient authority, and the new possibility that they may have been incorrect or incomplete, (and for Donne, wherein they were more or less correct than modern knowledge) are explored. Creation and material continuity may need to be clarified. The laboratory and the mine are rich sources of imagery.

To what extent does the change in approach to medicine suggest a changing approach to production and consumption of literature? We see a necessary proliferation of authors willing to take on both vernacular medical and religious writing, providing a parallel of the Reformation with iatrochemical theories. These works question long-
established authority, re-evaluate how theories should be adopted carefully in the modern world. Battles are carried out in print, creating energetic dialogues. Works go into multiple editions, augmented and expanded as new evidence is discovered. The consumption of literature goes hand in hand: the proliferation (perhaps even democratization) of the press creates a more critical, skeptical reader—as the reader sees the debates on the page develop, the reader understands these fields as contentious and not entirely understood. The authors are no longer authorities in their own rights, but voices in a dynamic dialogue of exploration.

The body is the battleground where soul fights matter; where state fights off invasion. One would be hard-pressed to prove that any of the authors involved in the current study truly believed in chemical theories—in fact, there is evidence to the contrary. Donne’s healing in the *Devotions* is effected through traditional purgatives. Bacon theorizes on the possibilities of chemical medicine to one day contribute to longevity, but usually consistent in his preference for use of humoral imagery, especially in his discussion of sedition, equating discontents “in the politic body like humors in the natural, which are apt to gather to a preternatural heat and to inflame” (as in Kitzes 90). Bacon’s combination of the two bodies, man and the state, hearkens back to the nationalist concern of William Clowes. For Clowes, the syphilis epidemic is treated as an issue of national physical and moral security. Sympathy seems likely, considering Bacon’s lifelong struggles to obtain and maintain various positions of national significance.
Apart from moments of outright rejection, the reaction to newer chemical theories of the body is slow and cautious. To loudly endorse the Paracelsian package (whatever that means) in 1600 would mean outright rejection of all previous medical authority as well as association with the more bizarre (and even today not thoroughly understood) religious aura. To reject not Paracelsus himself, but Paracelsianism and iatrochemistry as discussed in the period, would be an act ironically Paracelsian in its extremity. The dangers for our authors seem to be the novelty of this particular “ism,” and the need to approach it with caution. Perhaps there might be a parallel in the dangerous potential novelty of this period’s “new men” at court and in other influential positions. We might consider Thomas Dekker’s *Shoemaker’s Holiday* as a caveat against the dangers of coining new men; Donne’s populating the gates of Hell with “innovators,” and the reminder from Ecclesiastes 1:9, “There is nothing new under the sun.” It is important, then, for the authors to see developments and changes in medical theory and practice not as innovative progress—as “newness,”—but as rediscovery of forgotten or unpublished virtues of the earth.

Iatrochemistry changes the way poetry gets written. The Galenic-Paracelsian debate is suggestive of larger shifts in the poet’s relationship to his materials. Man is not just a closed vehicle containing limited material subject to imbalance: man is an open system, a living process, vulnerable to penetration by morbific semina. Seeds of disease can enter a man, and man must create his own medicines to send into the body to kill the disease. Man becomes an active agent of both his physical and spiritual salvation. The change in approach to medicine suggests a changing approach to production and
consumption of literature. From dedicated specialty medical tracts and treatises emerge a larger intertwined literacy resulting in what may be thought of, even if it is a bit anachronistic, an interdisciplinary conversation among those who read, react, and write.

Several authors, including Ole Peter Grell, explore the complementary relationship of Paracelsus to the Reformation. The early sixteenth century saw an explosion in printed vernacular materials, leading to a more rapid exchange of ideas and rise in literacy. Questioning the authority of Rome parallels questioning the authority of Galen and Hippocrates. In both cases, the problems in real life did not seem to accurately reflect what was happening in the foundational texts. For medicine, new texts were needed to reflect a practice that could work. For religion, the Reformation was needed to create a church more accurately reflective of the text.

Yet it does not work to lump our authors into a big pile of reformers, innovators, or radicals: they simply were none of these things. They were not textbook Paracelsians, nor were they expert Galenists. They have limited knowledge but aren’t afraid to use it. We seem to need an ad hoc category for authors like Shakespeare and Donne. They do not approach both Galen and Paracelsus with the intent to make progress, but they do find it productive to engage the ideas. Whenever Spenser approaches medicine, which he does at length, the purpose is relentlessly allegorical: it is a moral tool, not a current real topic for serious discussion. Thus, Spenser’s uses of medicine are medieval, and symbolic: any injury or disease, either physical or spiritual, ultimately has a moral cause. This is why Spenser’s involvement with medicine, although contemporary with our other authors, is uninteresting: “Allegory is dull because it comes to us with all of its questions
answered.” Our authors contrast with their contemporaries, especially the sickly George Herbert, in who’s “A Priest to the Temple,” his “discussion of medicine is short and guarded” (Allen 341). Donne’s discussion of medicine, throughout his entire works, is neither of these; nor is Shakespeare’s.

This is why these authors are interesting: not because we can locate them specifically in a belief system, but because we can see them as part of the discussion, the process of creating knowledge. They are all, in some sense, like beads of mercury loose upon the table.

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40 Professor John Watkins, in a graduate seminar on Spenser at the University of Minnesota, September 3, 2003.
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