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'Parfit praktisour' or Quack?

Chaucer's Physician and the Literary Image of Doctors After the Black Death*

William Snell

What nedeth hym that hath a parfit leche
To sechen othere leches in the toun?
Chaucer: *The Summonour's Tale*: 1956-57 [1]

William Dunbar (?1460-?1520), the late-medieval Scottish 'Chaucerian' poet, in what was perhaps one of his lighter moments lampooned an episode during the reign of James IV concerning a 'medicinar', or 'leich', and alchemist who was made Abbot of Tungland in March, 1504, by the aforementioned sovereign, and whom, in what may have been an effort to perk up the waning royal favor, tried unsuccessfully to fly from the top of Stirling castle in 1507. The poem

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* This paper was read in two earlier versions at the 9th General Conference on Medievalism, Montana (October, 1994) and the 67th General Meeting of the English Literary Society of Japan, Tsukuba, Japan (May, 1995), since when it has lain waiting to be resuscitated.

[1] *The Riverside Chaucer*, gen. Ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987). All subsequent quotations from Chaucer are taken from this edition.

is called 'Ane Ballat of the Fenȝeit Frier of Tungland/How he fell in the Myre fleand to Turkiland'. John Damian, the would-be Icarus concerned, descended like a stone, injuring his back. However, he attempted to 'purge his crime' by claiming that the wings he used were constructed from 'not uttirlie egle featheris bot som cok and capoune fetheris.'[2] The incident is reported to have provoked general mirth (or as one contemporary source put it, 'al war lyk to cleiue of laughter'[3]) and Damian's reputation was seemingly tarnished for life. But what are we to make of Dunbar's scathing remarks (in lines 29-40) that

> In pottingry [pharmacy] he wrocht grit pyne;
> He murdreist mony in medecyne...

And later:

> In leichcraft he was homecyd; ...
> Ful mony instrument for slawchtir
> Was in his gardeyance.

Is Dunbar's dissimulating *medicus* (the poet does not mention him by name, of course) a forerunner of the stock rogues of anti-quack literature to come; a precursor of 'Dr Slop', 'Dr Smellfungus' and 'Dr Pulsefeel'? And are there any comparisons or contrasts to be made

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[2] James Kinsley, ed. *The Poems of William Dunbar* (Oxford: O.U.P., 1979), pp. 161-64.

[3] Bishop John Leslie, *Historie of Scotland*. The Scottish Text Society, Vol. 2 (1885), p. 125.

between Dunbar's mentor Chaucer's 'Doctour of Phisik' in *The Canterbury Tales*, whom many have contended is a satire on the medieval medical profession, an 'artful, tricking practitioner in Physic' as Dr Samuel Johnson might have referred to him,[4] or at least a miserly profiteer from plague. Certainly, if we compare Dunbar's ascorbic mockery with eighteenth-century quack literature the disparity is almost negligible. In other words, here is an early example of what was to become a literary and artistic theme in itself: charlatanism and criticism of unqualified professionals, notably physicians.

He was a verray, parfit praktisour...

General Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales* : 422

Since the nineteenth century opinion regarding Chaucer's Physician has wavered. William Blake maintained in 1809 that he is 'first of his profession; perfect, learned, completely Master and Doctor in his Art' [5] and attempts were made (as have continued without any definite result) to show that the portrait in the General Prologue is based on an actual person. Mid-nineteenth century views suggest a gentle touch of satire, but by 1906 R. K. Root is postulating that he is a type: 'The character... has in it more of the quack than of the reputable practi-

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[4] See the *Dictionary* of 1755.

[5] G. E. Bentley, Jr., ed. *William Blake's Writings* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), p. 839.

tioner.'[6] William Curry, in 1925, describes the portrait as 'not a satire but a character-sketch'[7] despite the fact that Albert Nichols two years earlier made the statement that 'there is no suggestion he is a quack.'[8] But by the 1950s and '60s opinion seemed to have reached a stasis, the only real dissenting voice being that of Huling Ussery,[9] although Madeleine Cosman also took up the case for the defence in 1982.[10] Since then the jury has been out and the debate has come to a kind of impasse, i.e. Chaucer's portrait is ambivalent. In this paper I testify yet again in the Physician's defence by examining the evidence against him in the light of the image of doctors and the rise of quackery as a literary butt during the Restoration and eighteenth century; at how the satirical notion of the quack may have been encouraged by the way doctors behaved in times of plague, and how medical practitioners in medieval English literature match up to their real-life counterparts.

Skepticism and mistrust of the medical profession is almost as old as the profession itself. Medicine and its practice have always walked a tightrope between charlatanism and virtuous endeavour; cynicism of it

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[6] R. K. Root, *The Poetry of Chaucer: A Guide to Its Study and Appreciation* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1906), p. 219.

[7] W. C. Curry, 'Chaucer's Doctour of Physik'. *Philological Quarterly* 4 (1925) 3-36; 18.

[8] Albert G. Nichols, 'Medicine in Chaucer's Day', *Dalhousie Review* 12 (1932): 218-30; 219-20

[9] '[Chaucer's portrait of the Physician] is emphatically realistic... its ironic and 'satiric' elements have been unjustly exaggerated.' Huling E. Ussery, 'Chaucer's Physician,' *Tulane Studies in English* 19 (1971): 91

[10] 'An exemplary figure... a true and perfect practitioner.' Madeleine Cosman, 'Medieval Medical Malpractice and Chaucer's Physician,' *New York State Journal of Medicine* (Oct. 1972): 2439-2444

has a long history, as is plain from the satires of Juvenal;[11] indeed, since the collapse of Rome and the rise of the empiricists who perhaps placed too much trust in basic remedy as a universal cure. Mediaeval men and women were, as we are today, naturally skeptical and questioned the notion of what makes a professional qualified. This was perhaps especially the case when they were made aware of their impending mortality. Returning to Dunbar for a moment, in a poem that may or may not be associated with the Black Death of 1348-49, 'Timor Mortis Conturbat Me', he states:

> In medicyn them most practicianis,
> Lechis, surrigiannis and physiciannis,
> Thame self fra ded may not supple:
> *Timor Mortis conterbat me...* (37-40)[12]

There has always been a general *onus probandi* surrounding the effectiveness of doctors and medicine, a 'doctor heal thyself' attitude. Early censorship of physicians was confined to ecclesiastics also working as doctors, and their regulation only occurred for brief periods and mainly on the continent. What we fail to find is such regulation in England. England had no Salerno, no Montpelier, and nothing to compare with the Medical Faculty of Paris. In France, universities were backed by secular and ecclesiastical authorities in controlling or regulating medical practices, ranging from fines to imprisonment or excommunication. Not so in England, where the lack of effective

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[11] See, for example, *Satires* Vol. 10, p. 221.

[12] Kinsley, ed. *The Poems...* p. 62.

backing by the church and secular authorities lead to university ordinances being almost completely ineffective against people who were not university members themselves. Huling Ussery mentions how even in Oxford in 1400 although the university enacted an ordinance against unlicensed practitioners, it was only as disturbers of the peace (*pacis pertubattres*).[13] Jusserand cites the specific case of Roger Clark, sued in 1381 for illegal practice in London and publicly pilloried, and how Henry V in 1421 instituted ordinances against the 'meddlers with physic and surgery'[14]; we might also add the short-lived Guild of Physicians of 1423. The point to be made here is that there was no effective, sustained or concerted effort in England to control charlatans. On the Continent, however, the picture was quite different: the Faculty of Medicine at Paris seems to have been particularly successful in combating the quacks. Indeed, in 1340 Pope Clement VI gave Papal support to the faculty by threatening excommunication. Regulation was only spasmodically instituted in England to little or no consequence in England until the Apothecaries Act of 1815, and prior to the Apothecaries Act of 1858 the term 'qualified practitioner' had no precise limits. John Camp has argued that in Cromwell's day quacks were few and far between, but with the restoration of Charles II in 1660 the floodgates opened for quackery, which had been 'sparse and virtually underground' during Cromwell's time, many quacks having been on the fringes of royal court in Europe and accompanying the court back to England.[15] But might

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[13] Ussery, p. 19.

[14] J. J. Jusserand, *English Wayfaring Life in the Middle Ages*, trans. L. T. Smith (London: Ernest Benn, 1950), p. 98.

[15] See John Camp, *The Healer's Art* (London: Frederick Muller, 1978), p. 81.

there not have been other contributing factors in their ascent?

Although some might claim that the various effects of the so-called 'Black Death' of 1348-49 have been overestimated, this infamous plague and subsequent pandemics must surely have resulted in a loss of confidence in the medical profession. From 1348 to 1665 and the 'Great Plague of London' it would appear that there was little if any advancement either in medicine or in public attitudes toward disease, as the pestilential visitations continued to ascribed to sin well into the seventeenth century, and even later. For example, in Robert Wright's *A Receyt to stay the Plague* (1625) God's grace is demed more beneficial than Drugs or simples 'for those soares that sinne doth make' (here recall the moral of *The Physician's Tale*: 'Forsaketh synne, er synne yow forsake' line 286).

There were under Edward III's reign alone at least four plague epidemics. Following the accession of Richard II there were outbreaks in 1383 and 1387, followed by two severe national epidemics with mortality rates higher than 10% in 1390, and 1399-40. This cycle continued into the next century, actually becoming worse. In fact it has been observed that the general frequency of major infectious diseases including dysentery, malaria and smallpox, was as little as three to five years apart.[16] Thus Chaucer's reference to plague in the portrait of his physician, like that in *The Pardoner's Tale*, could be to any of numerous outbreaks in any period of the fourteenth century. It is not unreasonable then, to assume that disease must have undermined people's confidence in medical help. Here for example is Boccaccio on the Black Death in

[16] John Hatcher, in *Plague, Population and the English Economy* (London: Macmillan, 1977) provides the best list of 'national' epidemics.

Florence :

> No physician's prescriptions, no medicine seemed of the slightest benefit as a cure for this disease. In addition to those trained in medicine, the number of men and women who claimed to be physicians without having studied the subject at all grew immensely.[17]

A study of the case of Florence by John Henderson, however, shows that 'there was little sign at the time of the Black Death of the gulf between the medical profession and the laity which is alleged to have grown up in the fifteenth century.'[18] There were a number of instances where doctors were blamed on the Continent for spreading the plague, but we have no evidence to support this in England. Although doctors and conventional medicine may have appeared powerless against the disease, this did nothing to reduce the demand for professional advice, which resulted in a booming market for tracts. As Carole Rawcliffe observes, 'Far from damaging the relationship between doctor and patient, the unpredictable and often painful aspects of medieval medicine tended to bring them closer together.'[19]

Time of plague was, of course, the quacks' great opportunity. Para-

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[17] Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, trans. Guido Waldman (Oxford: O.U.P., 1993), p. 7.

[18] John Henderson, 'The Black Death in Florence: medical and communal responses.' *Death in Towns: Urban Responses to the Dying and the Dead, 1100-1600*, ed. Steven Bassett (Leicester: Leicester U. P., 1992), p. 7.

[19] Carole Rawcliffe, *Medicine and Society in the Later Middle Ages* (London: Alan Sutton, 1995), p. 117.

doxically, doctors by the very fact that many fled the cities (flight being itself the only true way of avoiding contagion) left the cities open to charlatans and their remedies. Yet those who chose to remain, whether for remunial benefit or not, were always willing to treat unpleasant and disgusting diseases with little concern for their own safety, this providing 'an unacknowledged moral lesson in responsibility.'[20] The result was that when the physicians tried to return to places such as London they found the quacks more securely established than before. Defoe, in his semi-fictional *Journal of the Plague Year*, vilifies the 'Doctors Bills' plastered on walls: 'Quacking and tampering in Physick'. And yet he differentiates between the doctors who stayed and the impostors:

> So the plague defied all medicine; the very physicians were seized with it, with their preservatives in their mouths; ...even some of the most eminent, and several of the most skillful surgeons. Abundance of quacks died too, who had the folly to trust their own medicines... Not that it is any derogation... of the physicians.... They endeavored to do good and save the lives of others...[21]

It is important to note here that not all physicians fled. Dr Nathan Paget, for example, an intimate friend of Milton, was one. Samuel Pepys in his *Diary* (22-23 January, 1666) refers to a meeting with a Dr Goddard who 'did fill us with talk in defense of his and his fellow

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[20] Eric Marple, *Magic, Medicine and Quackery* (London: n.p., 1932), p. 102.

[21] Daniel Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year* (London: Falcon Press, 1950), p. 44.

physicians' going out of town in the plague-time', his plea being that their particular patients were out of town and they were 'therefore left at liberty.'[22] On the 1625 plague, John Taylor, the 'water poet' and the Queen's bargeman, wrote 'The Fearful Summer, or London's Catastrophe', in which he states:

> On many a post I see Quacksalvers's bills
> Like fencers' challenges to show their skill.

He denounces quacks but eulogizes regular practitioners so conspicuous by their absence:

> This sharp invective no way seems to touch
> The learned physicians whom I honour much.
> The philosophical grave Herbalists, —
> These I admire and reverence...[23]

As would anyone considering the risks they were taking, for which they were of course handsomely rewarded. Which brings us back to Chaucer's 'parfit praktsour'...

Huling Ussery's highly persuasive monograph already referred to of 1971 should have put paid to any notion that Chaucer's doctor is an outright satire.[24] Ussery highlighted the defects of a tendency to work from the poem to the age instead of vice versa, while demonstrating

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[22] Samuel Pepys, *Diary* ed. Robert Latham and William Mathews (London: Bell and Hyman, 1972) Vol. 7, p. 21.

[23] Quoted from Charles Creighton, *A History of Epidemics in Britain* (London: C.U.P., 1894; reprint 1965), p. 515.

that Chaucer's Physician is, quote, 'in his medical practices, as distinguished from his desire for gain, a learned, competent and highly qualified practitioner, as well as a cleric.'[25] He adds that in 1387 it seems unlikely that more than twenty men in England were doctors of physic, if so many ; that the portrait is 'emphatically realistic' (see note 9 above).

> And yet he was but esy of dispence;
> He kepte that he wan in pestilence.
> For gold in physik is a cordail,
> Therefore he lovede gold in special.
>
> General Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*: 441-44

Froissart, Chaucer's virtual contemporary, devotes a chapter in the most glowing terms in his *Chronicles* to Maister Guillaume de Harsley, physician to Charles VI.[26] Harsley, though a miser, skillfully and successfully treated the French monarch. John Aubrey over two hundred years later lauds Dr William Harvey, proudly stating that he 'helpt

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[24] Jill Mann, who employs the term 'quack' in her evaluation of his role in the Canterbury Tales, does not refer to Ussery in *Chaucer and the Medieval Estates Satire* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1973). She also places too much emphasis on *Renart le Contrefait*, itself a blatant satire which actually testifies to how vagabond quacks were regarded with a certain *affection* by the common people

[25] Ussery, p. 2.

[26] Jean Froissart, *Chronicles* trans. and ed. Geoffrey Brereton (Penguin: Harmondsworth, pp. 400-401.

to carry him [Harvey] into the vault' at his funeral.[27] Chaucer is just as respectful in his portrait of his doctor. It should also be remembered that doctors often faced problems of being paid at all. Physicians were counseled against being unscrupulous in exaggerating costs and advised to request money or a pledge before treatment. C. H. Talbot observes that 'a number of instances are recorded in the Chancery Courts of refusal to pay when treatment had been successful; in most cases the patient's complaints were accepted.'[28] This is reinforced by Michael McVaugh's research, confirming public confidence in medicine and submission to medical authority from the early fourteenth century on. He also asserts that, in the case of Aragon (1285-1345)[29] at least, few instances of patient dissatisfaction with health care are evident, physicians only rarely being the targets of criticism.

Those who have insisted on Chaucer's doctor being a grasping charlatan have consistently fallen back on critical allusions in the *Romaunt of the Rose*, lines in Fragment B of the translation into Middle English

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[27] John Aubrey, *Brief Lives*, ed. Oliver Lawson Dick (Penguin: Harmondsworth: 1978), p. 292.

[28] C. H. Talbot, *Medicine in Medieval England* (London: Oldbourne, 1967), p. 138; see also Carole Rawcilffe, 'The Profits of Practice: The Wealth and Status of Medical Men in Later Medieval England'. *Social History of Medicine* I (1988): 61-78

[29] Michael R. McVaugh, *Medicine Before the Plague: Practitioners and their patients in the Crown of Aragon, 1285-1345*. (Cambridge: CUP, 1993). A study which, alas, ends just prior to the Black Death.

of Guillaume de Lorris's allegory begun in 1327 and finished later by Jean de Meun (le Clopinel) which is now accepted as being definitely *not* by Chaucer and which is anyway, a broad satiric attack on society in general.

> Phisiciens and advocates...
> They selle her science for wynyng
> And haunte her craft for gret getying.
> Her wynning is of such swetnesse
> That if a man falle in siknesse
> They are full glad for her encres...
>
> (521-44) [30]

In addition 'Moral' John Gower's criticism in *Mirour de l'omme* (1376?-78) is particularly directed against apothecaries—who were essentially tradesmen at that time—and their (business) relationship with physicians, apart from three lines:

> Phisicien d'enfermeté
> Ly mires de la gent blescé
> Sont leez, q'ensi gaingner porront
>
> (24 : 289-91)

That is all, in a poem consisting of some thirty thousand lines, and one which concludes that all men are corrupt anyway! Commentators have been seemingly eager to draw analogies between Chaucer and Gower,

[30] See *The Riverside Chaucer*, p. 686.

and indeed there are a few lines on the relationship between apothecaries and physicians, and their flamboyant style of dress. However, in *Confessio Amantis*, in Gower's interpretation of the 'Tale of Apollonius [or Appolinus] of Tyre' we find a physician comparable with John Aubrey's portrait of Dr Harvey:

> Ther cam walkende upon the stronde [shore]
> A worthi clerc, a Surgien,
> And ek a gret Phisicien.
>
> *Liber Octavus*, 1162-5

He later also refers to 'Cerymon that worthi leche' (1209).[31] Note the phraseology here and that no satire is intended; in fact Gower if anything exaggerates the commendable role that Ceremon plays in the tale.

Let us at this point return to the accusation of extravagance of attire made against Chaucer's Physician, clad as he is in the finest taffeta and silk, in red and blue.[32] Much post-medieval criticism or ridicule of doctors for their mode of dress does exist, such as the seventeenth-century lexicographer Cotgrave's study of 'Dr Pulsefeel':

> My name is Dr Pulsefeel, a poor doctor of physick
> That doth wear three pile of velvet in his hat...[33]

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[31] G. C. Macaulay, ed. *The English Works of John Gower*, 2 Vols. EETS es LXXXI, 1900-1901 (reprint 1957)

[32] See here also the marginal illustration in the Huntingdon MS.

[33] Marple, p. 102.

This possibly harks back to the sumptuary laws of medieval times, the privileges which they bestowed and the envy that must have generated. Over-dressing, or dressing above one's station, though generally admonished as a vice in post-plague times (for example, see the Sumptuary Law of 1363) was actually condoned in the case of doctors, who were permitted extra luxury as well as their wives.[34] But critics who have attempted to show Chaucer's portrait of the medical doctor as a damning satire invariably quote Langland

> ...Phisik shal hise furred hodes for his fode selle,
> And his cloke of Calabre with alle the knappes of golde...
>
> B-text, *Passus VI*, 270-76[35]

But in Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*, what one would expect to come in for most disapproval finds approbation:

> Doctour of Phisick cled in ane Skarlot goun,
> And furrit weill, *as sic ane aucht to be*
> Honest and gude, and not ane word culd lie.
>
> (250-53)[36]

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[34] Robert S. Gottfried, *Doctors and Medicine in Medieval England*, 1340-1530 (Princeton U.P., 1986), pp. 56-7.

[35] William Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, ed. A.V.C. Schmidt, second ed. (London: Dent, 1995); see also Notes, p. 322 'Phisik's expensive clothes are either payment in kind or evidence of the large fees he charges'.

[36] Robert Henryson, *The Testament of Cresseid*, ed. Bruce Dickens (London: Faber, 1925). Emphasis mine.

My argument here is that the doctor may have profited, but it was tacitly acceptable to do so... especially in times of plague when, while others fled, many practitioners stayed to face the music. As for the accusation of cupidity in the reference Chaucer makes to 'love of gold' ('For gold in physik is a cordial' General Prologue l. 443 quoted above), it has been long recognised that gold has provided a *bone fide* medicinal panacea, if not a cure-all, or has acted as an element of such for centuries.[37] Wealth also, in some professions, increases repute.

Probably the first portrayal of a quack on the Restoration stage was John Wilson's comedy *The Cheats* (1663) which was heavily censored before being licensed to be performed, and then banned within two weeks, possibly because a number of people in the audience recognized themselves.

By the eighteenth century we can still see a movement towards professional credibility. Smollet was himself a doctor. Henry Fielding could be argued to have treated doctors the same as other corrupt professionals. His ridicule of physicians in *The Mock Doctor* (1732) or *The Dumb Lady Cured* (1732) is derived from Molière's *Le Médicine malgré lui*.[38] However, his satirical attacks in *Joseph Andrews* and

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[37] See Lydgate's 'A Dietary and Doctrine for Pestilence' : 69-72, where it is advocated (John Lydgate, *Minor Poems*, ed. MacCracken Vol II pp. 73-76 (London EETS os 192, 1934). It is also presently found in drugs such as Sodium Aurothiomalate and Auranofin, which are prescribed for arthritis (see *Dr Mike Smith's Postbag: Arthritis*. London : Kyle Cathie, 1993. p. 50).

[38] Glenn W. Hatfield, 'Quacks, Pettyfoggers, and Parsons: Fielding's case against the Learned Professions.' *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* IX. 1967: 69-83

Tom Jones are based on characters derived from convention, more stereotyped than even Hogarth, who was perhaps the most exclusively derogatory and pejorative portrayer of medical men and women. Peter Wagner contends, however, that the relentless derogatory discourse about doctors had a clear, if wrong idea of physicians as quacks as a social group, and may have inspired the same idea in patients.[39] The characters derived from convention would have been instantly recognizable to the audience, but not necessarily accurate. Fielding vilified physicians, but had little reason to complain about those who treated himself or his family. Even Swift, that almost pathological hater of doctors,[40] though he chose real-life targets on which to base his satires, amongst which *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) probably marks the zenith of quack satire; yet the Queen's Physician, Dr John Arbuthnot, remained his lifelong and much admired friend. It should also not be forgotten that Chaucer counted among his many acquaintances John of Gaddesden (1280-1364), whose name he slyly introduces into his portrait of the Physician in the General Prologue. Indeed, the reference to love of money is reflected in one of the chapter headings in Gaddesden's *Rosa Anglica*: 'Of disagreeable diseases which the Doctor can seldom make money by', and its subtitle 'How to make money in Medicine'.[41]

The great irony is that the learned were often themselves the victims

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[39] Peter Wagner, 'The satire on doctors in Hogarth's graphic works.' Marie Roberts and Roy Porter, eds. *Literature and Medicine During the Eighteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 201.

[40] See, for example, 'Verses on the death of Dr Swift', *Swift's Poems*, ed. Harold Williams, Oxford, 1958, Vol. 2, p. 557.

[41] A book which ran to four foreign editions. See V. Bell, *Little Gaddesden* (London: n.p. 1949), pp. 23-24.

of quackery. Gibbon, Fielding and Chesterfield were all treated by the quack Joshua Ward, who made a fortune out of selling drops, pills and 'liquid sweat' — twice satirized by Pope in 'Imitations of Horace'. Dr Robert James's most potent of antimonyl potions, his 'febrifuge' powders, may have hastened the deaths of Goldsmith and Sterne.[42] It has also been noted that tolerance of quacks seems to have been remarkably high among those who might have been better informed![43]

Thus the attitude of some writers may have been coloured by personal experience. The French writer Montaigne's skeptical attitude, for example, may reflect his failure to find relief from a stone by taking the waters in Italy, 1580-81. Petrarch is another case in point. His vitriolic *Invectiva contra medicum* of 1355, although it seems to have been admired by Boccaccio, defeated its own object through its intemperate violence. One wonders, however, how much the death of his beloved Laura in the plague of 1348 in Verona curdled his view of physicians? Indeed, the years 1361-63 were a record of death in Petrarch's life: his son died in the 1361 visitation in Milan; his friends Lello Stefani, Marco Barbato and Francesco Nelli were victims in 1363.[44] Muriel Bowden has suggested that 'Chaucer's [ill] opinion about physicians in general was coloured by the jibes' of Petrarch.[45] And yet even Petrarch seem-

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[42] Vernon Coleman, *The History of Medicine* (London: Robert Hale, 1985), p. 103).

[43] See 'Swift and the Physicians: Aspects of Satire and Status' Clive T. Probyn, *Medical History* XVII, 1974: 249-61: 252

[44] C. H. Holloway-Calthorop, *Petrarch: His Life and Times* (London: Methuen, 1907), p. 233.

[45] Muriel Bowden, *A Commentary on the* General Prologue *to the Canterbury Tales* (London: Souvenir Press, 1981) p. 209.

ingly maintained pleasant relations with more than one physician in his later years, such as Dondi dell' Oroglio. One of the most influential doctors of his day, Petrarch claimed that Oroglio was so skilled he could bring life back to the dead : even those whose bodies had turned green after years in the ground![46]

To conclude, although Chaucer's doctor practices what in our day would represent quackery and charlatanism, such as his use of 'magic natureel', and his large increment and extravagance be worthy of censure, we are not justified in applying our medical or moral standards to him. He was using the best methods available to him at the time, with which Chaucer probably concurred.[47] It must also be accepted that despite the ridicule hurled against physicians during the Restoration and later, and the fact that for every skilled physician there was a gaggle of unskilled quacks, the literati who criticized the profession (who saw it as their moral duty to do so) still maintained respect for the 'worthy' practitioners, or those who they deemed to be such. But perhaps most importantly we must not fall into the trap of assuming that the seventeenth-century image of the quack was a literary commonplace in the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries. Evidence seems to

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[46] *Lettre senili di Francesco Petrarcha*, ed. G. Francesetti, 2 Vols. (Florence, 1870), p. 124.

[47] His knowledge of astrology, for example, is cogent with the teaching of the Hippocratic text *Epidemics* (see Faye Marie Getz, 'Black Death and the Silver Lining: Meaning, Continuity, and Revolutionary Change in Histories of Medieval Plague'. *Journal of the History of Biology* Vol. 24, no. 2 (1991): 265

suggest that in the fourteenth century common people regarded doctors with a tolerance for someone doing his best, and respect for a man of learning, but 'the uncomfortable conviction that he was largely irrelevant to the real and urgent problems of their lives.'[48] Critical interpretations of Chaucer's Physician as a quack have been based on the moral outrage and a 'stock' literary character of a later (more enlightened?) age.

[48] Phillip Zeigler, *The Black Death* (London: Collins, 1969; 1991) p. 78.