

## An Analysis of Geoffrey Chaucer's Understanding of Medicine and its Influence on His Work

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The detail that Geoffrey Chaucer poured into *The Canterbury Tales* elevated his work to a level that was previously unknown. Buried within this work are fragments of medical detail that ignite the fire for a new understanding and admiration of Chaucer's work. Each physical description, physiological explanation, and philosophical attitude, adds to the unique interpretations of Chaucer's work through a medical eye. It appears that Chaucer's understanding of medicine was that it dealt primarily with maintaining a healthy and balanced life free of excess and vices, and his beliefs were rooted in early humanist philosophy. This underlying medical paradigm serves as the foundation upon which Chaucer describes physical characteristics, ailments, and treatments of his characters, along with formulating an overarching understanding of the medical practice.

The medical field finds its way into our society after passing through the hands of doctors, scientists, theologians, artists, and even writers over the course of history. Each has had a hand in shaping the science into what it is today. Faye Marie Getz in her introduction to *Health, Disease and Healing in Medieval Culture* describes the prevailing notion of medicine in the medieval period where, "the best physician was not necessarily the cleverest or most experienced one, but rather the one who had devoted the most time to the *doctrina*, or teaching, of the past. Thus, learned medieval Christian medicine found value not in the seeking out of new discoveries, but in the evaluation of previous learning (Campbell et. all xv)." It is in this school of thought that Chaucer studied medicine as well. He was known to study the works of Vincent of Beauvais (Aiken 361), and delved into, "medical matter of ancient Greek and Roman writers, especially the texts of the Hippocratic corpus, the biological works of Aristotle, and the writings of the Greek-speaking Roman physician Galen (Getz xv)." Chaucer's "Doctour of Phisik" describes all the individuals that have impacted medicine listing, "...the olde Esculapius and Deyscorides, and eek Risus, Ypocra, Haly and Galyen, Serapion, Razis and Avycen, Averrois, Damascien and Constantyn, Bernard and Gatesden and Gilbertyn (Gordon

371)." The listing of all these famous physicians adds to the authority of the Chaucer, the legitimacy of *The Canterbury Tales*, and in the *General Prologue* builds on the exposition of the Physician's medical knowledge. The *General Prologue* is the readers first glimpse of a character, and a reflection of Chaucer directly since he is giving each description. Therefore the detail given in listing each name informs the reader that Chaucer does not plan on straying away from reality and that his characters exist in the same society the contemporary reader is in, therefore adding another dimension of familiarity to the novel. Faye Getz in another work, *Medicine in the English Middle Ages* comments that Chaucer was familiar with the work of each of these individuals and would familiarize himself with medicine while visiting Italy. Chaucer followed in parallel to the contemporary study of medicine and developed his own understanding of medicine and its practice.

Chaucer medical knowledge was shared by others of his time. Getz explains that, "Chaucer shared with his learned contemporaries certain notions about the way the body functioned: through the heat of digestion, the body "cooked" its food, transforming what one ate and drank into the four humors. These humors (blood, choler, phlegm, and melancholy) nourished the bodily parts—organs, bones, muscles—which in turn digested this nourishment according to each one's needs...Learned medicine is thus called dietic medicine, from its notion that the central physiological process was eating and digestion, followed by the purgation of superfluities (Getz 87)." This but a taste of all the knowledge Chaucer had amassed by the time he began composing *The Canterbury Tales*.

Walter Clyde Curry comments that medieval medicines grounding in the principles of astrology also influenced Chaucer. The belief that celestial influences affected the healthy or diseased human body was a sentiment shared by many noted physicians such as Rhazes who said, "Wise physicians are agreed that all things here below, air, water, the complexions, sickness, and so on, suffer change in accordance with the motions of the planets (Curry 7)." This is why in Chaucer's description of the physician he adds, "For he was

grounded in astronomy;/ He kepte his pacient a ful greet del/ In houres, by his gaik naturel (CT A.414-416).” It was believed that the four humors fluctuated with the waxing and waning of the moon and that the Chaucer’s physician had mastered this principle of medicine through astronomy (Curry 13). The description of Chaucer’s knowledge by Getz is reflected again in the *General Prologue* where it is described that, “the physician examining the patient had to ascertain whether the nature of the sickness is cold or warm, moist or dry and which of the four humors produced the malady (Gordon 371).” The physician practiced what he preached. The prologue states that “Of his diete mesurable was he,/ For it was of no superfluitee,/ But of greet norissyng and digestible (CT A.435-437).” This is related to Chaucer’s belief that medicine rested upon “the classical sense of *dieta*—one’s entire regimen or mode of living (Getz 87).” This notion also plays into physical descriptions of characters and physiognomy, along with episodes from *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale* and Dame Petrolete’s explanation of Chauntecleer’s dream. Aside for the knowledge Chaucer had of medicine, he was also interested in its practice and the vocation of being a physician.

Getz writes that, “medieval medicine was much more than the survival and modification of classical learning, however. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all demanded of their followers the practice of charity...the relationship between clerical duty and medical care was a strong one throughout the medieval period, and charity was thought to be the best motive for medical practice (Campbell et. all xvi).” There are two characters on the pilgrimage that Chaucer describes in healing manner. There is the Pardoner with his healing relics, and the physician. The Pardoner has religious relics to sell to pilgrims that will cure them whatever ailments they may have, while the physician is a practicing Doctor of Phisik who, according to Chaucer, would know that cause of every malady, and was well grounded in astrology, medicine, and surgery. However neither of these characters practice medicine out of charity and for this Chaucer is critical of them.

Chaucer description of the Pardoner paints him as quack, a charlatan, and a false healer who sold pig bones and pillow cases as religious artifacts. The Doctor of Phisik falls short of ideal because of his desire for gold as Chaucer writes, “In sangwyn and in pers he clad was al/Lyned with taffeta and with sandal/And yet he was but esy of dispence/He kepte that he wan in pestilence/For gold in phisik is a cordial/Therefore he lovede gold

in special (CT A.439-444).” Though he was frugal, he wore expensive clothing decked in taffeta and silk and most importantly made money of the pestilence, or the plague. Chaucer jokes sarcastically that the gold was a cordial, glossed as medicine for the heart; and that is why he loved gold in that special way. Though charitable practice of medicine was good in theory, Getz points out that, “medicine can be thought of as in some senses “market-driven”: that is, medical care responds to the demands of patrons and their ability to pay. Market forces were to some extent at work in medieval society as well, in that medieval medicine, like poetry, could be said to have had an audience (Campbell et. All xvi).” The Doctor of Phisik also provides a “character-sketch” of physicians in the Middle Ages. Chaucer as “the student of human nature undoubtedly has a discerning eye fixed merrily upon the pompous and fraudulent practitioners of his time who bungle the handling of these [medical] principles; he may even have [had] in mind a particular physician of his acquaintance...such as possibly John of Burgundy (Curry 27).” Chaucer’s character remains rational, calculated, and detached from religion. He is a businessman acquainted with apothecaries, plays on the credulity of his patients, and an enigma to the reader. One can interpret Chaucer’s description of the Doctor of Phisik in the *General Prologue* as criticism of character, the social institution of medicine, and “market-driven” medical care, while maintaining the truth about the status quo.

With a clear understanding of Chaucer’s medical background and philosophy, one can now tackle the question of why Chaucer went into such medical detail in his work. Through readings in *The Canterbury Tales* evidence suggests that the detail was provided for medical accuracy and for advancing the moral of a tale through the medical philosophy of the medieval period. Therefore one could take a look specifically at *The Knight’s Tale* for medical accuracy, *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale* for medical morality, and the *General Prologue* along with other prologues throughout *The Canterbury Tales* for physiognomy.

In *The Knight’s Tale* Arcite is mortally wounded on the battle field after the competition with Palamon as he is thrown from his horse causing his breast “to-brosten with his sadel-bowe.” After this injury symptoms appear which Chaucer illustrates in great detail beginning with how, “Swelleth the brest of Arcite, and the soore/Encreeseth at his herte moore and moore./The clothered blood, for any lechecraft/Corrupteth, and is in his bouk ylaft/That neither

veyne-blood, ne ventusyng/Ne drynke of herbes may ben his helpynge./The vertu expulsif, or animal/Fro thilike vertu cleped natural/Ne may the venym voyden ne expelle (CT A.2744-2751).” Pauline Aiken has determined the much of the medical understanding and terminology used in Chaucer’s elaboration of Arcite’s wound probably came from a text written by Vincent of Beauvais known as *Speculum Majus*. This medieval encyclopedia coincides with Chaucer’s explanations of Arcite’s wound, symptoms, treatment, and death.

Beginning with the description of the wound, medieval physicians understood the formation of an impostume in the heart or around the lungs would occur after a receiving a physical injury. The swelling around Arcite’s breast that Chaucer describes is such an impostume and furthermore, Aiken states that in the *Speculum*, “Vincent deals with a wound and an impostume both strikingly similar to those with which the unfortunate [Arcite] is afflicted. The wound is classified as a *spearatio continualionis*...[and] seems to be an exact counterpart of Arcite’s...The impostume resembles Arcite’s in every detail (Aiken 362).” The formation of the impostume from blood leads to Chaucer’s description of Arcite’s symptoms.

The humor of blood was one of the four medieval humors that was studied closely. Vincent along with many other physicians of the time understood that any “corruption” of the blood would necessarily lead to infection and ultimately death since the blood circulated through the body spreading the disease. Chaucer understood this as well and added it into his description of Arcite’s symptoms and their cause. In order to remedy a corrupted humor, medieval science was preoccupied with expelling it from the body via blood-letting or the use of herbs as laxatives and expulsive agents. Chaucer notes two types of blood letting: the ordinary blood letting and “ventusynge”. Ordinary blood letting was done at the limbs and on the veins, while *ventosa* or “ventusynge” was performed on the body to help patients with gross blood. Vincent and Chaucer both agree on these methods of blood letting (Aiken 362-363). Chaucer continues his mastery of medicine as he launches into the “vertu[s]” of the body.

Aside from the humors, and concepts of *dieta*, medieval medicine was also grounded in the theory of “virtues” in the body. Aiken explains that, “In each of the three principle organs of the body—namely, the liver, heart, and brain—is generated one of the “spirits,”...The three spirits, natural, vital, and animal, establish in their respective seats the corresponding “virtues,” the vital forces

through which the soul mingles itself with the body and directs its actions...The *virtus animalis* is situated in the brain and functions by means of the nerves...The *virtus naturalis* has its seat in the liver. Its *spiritus* is diffused through the veins (Aiken 363).” The *virtus vitalis* was believed to be housed throughout the body and in the breathing cavities. With the theory of the virtues in mind, Chaucer’s journey through the failing virtues is actually more complex than one would expect. Note how Chaucer describes that the expulsive power (being the “animal”) affects the “natural” virtue, and because of the impostume, the noxious fumes and corrupted blood could not be expelled. The thing to admire here is that Chaucer correctly identifies the cause of the inability to expel the impurities from Arcite’s body as being an injury to the *virtus animalis*. Aiken states that any lay person would assume such symptoms would be caused by direct injury to the *vitalis* which controlled breathing (Aiken 365). The injury to Arcite however did not damage his heart for he continues to live after the accident therefore the impostume did not protrude upon the *vitalis*. By implicating damage to the *animalis* Chaucer takes the diagnosis further into neurology, claiming that damage to nerves leading to the brain made the contraction of the chest cavity impossible severely hindering involuntary action of breathing and therefore the expulsive powers of the body were effectively removed. Aiken adds that Vincent stressed the importance of breathing to purify the body as, “one of the most important functions of the pure air drawn into the lungs in the process of breathing was the purification of the blood by the means of the expulsion of its noxious fumes (Aiken 366).” Aiken continues that the successive failure of Arcite’s respiratory system from the “pypes of his longes” and “every lacerate in his breast” has an, “extraordinary similarity...to Vincent’s *pulmonis cannalibus* and *lacertis pectoris* [which] might suggest the conjecture that Chaucer was writing with the *Speculum* open before him (Aiken 367).” As the Arcite’s death draws nearer, Chaucer puts the work of doctor in the hands of nature, and if nature shall not bring Arcite to health, then church shall be his final destination.

Looking beyond Chaucer’s desire to be medically accurate, I believe that Chaucer the storyteller (as opposed to the scholar) understands the Knight who is telling this story would be well educated, therefore stylistically this detail adds authority to the Knight, who among the pilgrims has the highest rank and greatest authority. Resuming the discussion of medicine,

close reading of the Nun's Priest's Tale illuminates Chaucer's position on medicine's moral worth as guide to how one should live their life.

In *The Nun's Priest's Tale*, beasts that live on a farm are the main characters of the tale. Chauntecleer, the male rooster, awakens from dream in which sees a fox that was poised to kill him. His wife, the dame Pertelote, gives him medical advice about the source of his dreams that is derived from Vincent of Beauvais again. Pertelote exclaims that, "Nothyng, God woot, but vanitee in sweven is/Swevenes engendren of replecciouns/And ofte of fume and of complecciouns/Whan humours been to habundant in a wight/Certes this dreem, which ye han met to-nyght/Cometh of the Greete superfluytee/Of youre rede colera, pardee/Which causeth folk to dreden in hir dremes/Of arwes, and of fyr with rede lemes/Of rede beestes, that they wol hem byte (CT B.4112-4121)." To Pertelote the dreams are simply caused by overeating which will come to pass or from an abundance of red cholera humor also known as red bile. This diagnosis is taken straight from the *Speculum* as well. One could continue find parallels with Chaucer and Beauvais, however this passage differs from the one discussed earlier in *The Knight's Tale* because Chaucer also discusses superfluities and the problems that arise from excess and vanity that Chauntecleer is susceptible to. In the description of the widow who owns the farm, Chaucer writes of how she is modest and devoid of excess—"Of poynaunt sauce hir neded never a deel./ No deyntee morsel passed thurgh hir throte;/ Hir diete was accordant to hir cote./ Repleccioun ne made hire nevere sik;/ Attempree diete was al her phisik,/ And exercise, and hertes suffisaunce (CT B.2834-2839)." She is close to nature and virtuous keeping her self free from spicy and lavish food having a temperate diet. Chaucer's brief description of the widow stands in stark opposition to Chauntecleer who is excessive in every way from his vanity, his sexuality, his speech, and finally his initial disbelief and eventual belief in his wife's materialistic explanation of his dream (Getz 88). His over-indulgence of material senses was the source of his illness. Critics also believe that Chaucer is going beyond medicine here and actually criticizes it as Getz writes that Chaucer believed, "the individual knows in his or her heart how best to lead the good life... Resort to "experts"—and Chaucer delighted to use medical experts as his bad example—appealed only to vanity and led one astray. Chauntecleer's problem was moral, not physical (Getz 88)." Pertelote was the medical expert that Chaucer

attacks and her advice almost gets Chauntecleer killed. I do not believe Chaucer wants the reader to lose faith in medical explanations for maladies, but he does warn against putting too much faith in the practice and dismissing religious convictions or self-beliefs. Chaucer believes in the practicalities of medicine, however puts them in balance with spirituality and good living. Aside from causing illness, living a depraved and morally depraved life will also cause physical changes in the individual according to Chaucer and the school of thought known as physiognomy.

Physiognomy is a theory that existed during the medieval period that suggested a person's outer appearance, primarily the face, is a reflection of that person's character and personality. The best case study for physiognomy in *The Canterbury Tales* is the Summoner. Says the poet of the Summoner, "A Somnour was there with us in that place,/ That hadde a fyr-reed cherubynnes face,/ For sawcefleem he was, and lecherous, as a sparwe;/ With scalled browes blake, and piled berd;/ Of his visage children were afred (CT A.623-628)." Walter Clyde Curry states that, "in the Summoner's case, Chaucer the scientist has first created, according to the best medical authority of his time, a perfect figure representing that type of leprosy called alopecia, and Chaucer the poet has breathed into it the breath of life (Curry 404)." He continues that, "Chaucer has indicated, moreover, the two principal causes of the disease: the Summoner is "lecherous as a sparwe," and is accustomed to the eating of onions, garlic, and leeks and to the drinking of strong wine red as blood." Again one can see the effect that diet has on the understanding of medicine and also how it changes the humours and causes diseases. Also Chaucer stresses the importance of living a moral life by showing how physically deformed the Summoner has become because of his lifestyle. Other characters such as the Reeve and Pardoner are also victims of the physiognomy which brings out their faults onto their physical bodies. Even the case of treatment for these traits Chaucer states the Summoner is so corrupt that, "Ther nas quik-silver, litarge, ne brimston,/ Boras, ceruce ne oille of tarte noon,/ Ne oynement that wolde clense and byte,/ That him mighte helpen of his whelks white,/ Nor of the knobbes sittenge on his chekes (CT A.629-633)."

Medical insight brings a new light to the reading of parts of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* that feeds the development of characters, plots, and morals in the poems. With the emergence of humanism and its melding into medicine, medi-

eval practices and theories were moved aside and return was made to the classics in the Renaissance. Chaucer effectively captured the coming change in medical views and combined it with existing theories to provide vivid details and encompassing themes of morality that continue to impress scholars with its accuracy and breadth. The preservation of medical theory and knowledge is reflected best through one of Hippocrates aphorisms: life is short, art is long. The sewing together of art and medicine by Chaucer has given the reader a beautiful tapestry of literature that continues to wrap them in enchantment and awe.

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