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Medicine and Surgery

Thomas Joseph Pettigrew

Frontmatter

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SUPERSTITIONS

CONNECTED WITH

MEDICINE AND SURGERY.

INTRODUCTION.

“Man is a dupeable animal. Quacks in medicine, quacks in religion, and quacks in politics know this, and act upon that knowledge. There is scarcely any one who may not, like a trout, be taken by tickling.”

SOUTHEY.

WHEN we consider that health has ever been looked upon as the first of all blessings, we cannot be surprised at the regard, esteem, and even veneration which have been paid to those who have successfully devoted themselves to the removal or relief of disease. “Homines ad Deos nullâ re proprius accedunt, quam salutem hominibus dando,” is the expressed opinion of the celebrated Roman orator. Medicine, however, has been, and still continues to be, an art so conjectural and uncertain, that our astonishment at the anxiety with which empirics have been sought after and followed is much diminished. Regular professional men are too sensible of the deficiencies, and too keenly alive to the uncertainty of the power

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

of medicines over disease, to venture to speak boldly and decisively so as to gain the entire confidence of their patients, whose natural irritability is perhaps, under the influence of disease, much excited, increased, and aggravated. The bold and unblushing assertion of the empiric of a never-failing remedy,* constantly reiterated, inspires confidence in the invalid, and not unfrequently tends by its operation on the mind to assist in the eradication of disorder. Few people possess either leisure or inclination in large and populous places, where alone the quack sets upon his work of deception and not unfrequently destruction, to examine into and detect the imposition. Human credulity is too strong to resist the bold and unblushing assertions of the empiric, and to his hands is readily committed the care of the most precious gift of Heaven.

It has not inaptly been observed,† that “in the true infancy of science, philosophers were as imaginative a race as poets.” No discovery, in short, was promulgated but in combination with the marvellous. Hence the ‘Admirable Secrets’ of Albertus Magnus; the ‘Natural Magic’ of Baptista Porta; the ‘Demonies’ of Cornelius Agrippa; the ‘Elixir of Life’ of Van Helmont; and the ‘Fairy’ of Paracelsus. It would be no easy task to assign the earliest age of quackery in medicine. It is, perhaps, coeval with the introduction of chemistry, but the first renowned quack is probably to be found in Paracelsus. He boasted his power of making man immortal, yet he died at the early age of 48 years, in the hospital of St. Sebastian, at Saltzburg in Germany, in the year 1541,

* “Death is the cure of all diseases. There is no *catholicon* or universal remedy I know, but this, which though nauseous to queasy stomachs, yet to prepared appetites is nectar, and a pleasant potion of immortality.” (Browne's *Religio Medici*.)

† D'Israeli's *Curiosities of Literature*, second series, vol. iii. p. 1.

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Thomas Joseph Pettigrew

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION.

3

having followed a life of great indulgence and dissipation. It is not a little singular that the family name of this “strange and paradoxical genius” should have been *Bombastus*, which he changed, as was a common practice of the times in which he lived, to another, and assumed that of Paracelsus. His zeal and application were extraordinary. He derived his knowledge from travelling in various parts of the world, and consulting monks, conjurors, barber-surgeons, old women, and all persons said to be gifted with the knowledge of secret arts, remedies, &c. He was professor of medicine at Basle, but became renowned by a nostrum called *azoth*, which he vaunted as the philosopher’s stone—the medical panacea—the tincture of life. He styled himself the “monarch of physicians,” and arrogantly explained that the hair on the back of his head knew more than all authors; that the clasps of his shoes were more learned than Galen or Avicenna; and that his beard possessed more experience than all the academy of Basle: “*Stultissimus pilus occipitis mei plus scit, quam omnes vestri doctores, et calceorum meorum annuli doctiores sunt quam vester Galenus et Avicenna, barba mea plus experta est quam vestræ omnes Academiæ.*” Extravagant as all this may appear, it yet had the effect of dissipating a too excessive admiration of the ancients, at that time prevalent in the schools. His boldness was such, that at his first lecture upon his appointment to the professorship in the University, he, before his pupils, publicly burnt the writings of Galen and Avicenna! His education, however, was very imperfect, and he was ignorant even of his own vernacular tongue. Thomas Erastus, one of his pupils, wrote a book to detect his impostures. He was nevertheless a man of great ability, and did much towards the advancement of chemical knowledge, particularly in its application to the purposes of medicine. Armed

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

with opium, antimony and mercury, he effected many extraordinary cures.

The quadrature of the circle; the multiplication of the cube; the perpetual motion; the philosophical stone; magic; and judicial astrology have been aptly denominated “The Six Follies of Science.” However vain has been the study, and however futile the results, the indulgence of the vanity and the pains of the research have not been unattended with benefit to mankind; inasmuch as they have been the cause of many discoveries of much importance. The errors in medicine have usually originated in the speculative conceits of men of superior capacities. “The blunders of the weak are short lived, but a false theory, with a semblance of nature, struck in the mint of genius, often deceives the learned, and passes current through the world.”

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Thomas Joseph Pettigrew

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

ALCHYMY.

“Trust to this doctrine, set herein your desiers,
And now lerne the regiment of your fiers.”

NORTON.

THE study of alchymy gave birth to chemistry ; its principal object was the transmutation of the baser metals into gold and silver. Suidas, whose Greek Lexicon was composed in the twelfth century, has defined chemistry “the preparation of silver and gold :” this is a distinct identification of chemistry with alchymy. A better etymology of the word is to be found, perhaps, in the fact that the country of Egypt was called Khame, Chemia, Chamia, or Cham, the meaning of which in hieroglyphics is black,—an allusion, probably, to the dark soil thrown up by the river Nile ; and in this country chemistry may be looked upon to have originated. Chemistry now happily constitutes a science of great practical benefit to mankind, embraces objects of vast extent and utility, gives to us an intimate knowledge of the nature of bodies, and no longer tempts either the superstitious or the avaricious to the attainment of improper, unnatural, or inordinate gains. Dr. Thomson* is disposed to believe that chemistry or alchymy—understanding by these terms the art of making gold and silver —originated with the

* History of Chemistry, p. 14.

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Thomas Joseph Pettigrew

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Arabians after the establishment of the caliphs, and that its application was then first directed to the purposes of medicine. Geber, who lived in the seventh century, he observes, makes no allusion to the transmutation of metals; and he hence concludes that the practice dates its origin posterior to his time. It must, however, be remarked that Geber expressly mentions the philosopher's stone, and professes to give the mode of preparing it, and I know not how to separate this art from that of converting or altering the nature of different substances. Dr. Thomson regards Geber's work as the earliest chemical treatise in existence; and he describes it as written with so much plainness that we can understand the nature of the substances which he employed, the processes which he followed, and the greater number of the products he obtained. The chemical facts observable in his work he thinks entitle him to the appellation of "The father and founder of chemistry." Yet Dr. Johnson regarded his language as so proverbially obscure, that he presumed the word gibberish or geberish to have arisen from the style of his writings. The language of the alchemists was enigmatical and obscure, their science and all its processes were mysterious, and directed to be conducted with great privacy. The metals were personified—gold was the only pure and healthy man, the others were as "lepers" or diseased ones.

Alchemy cannot be regarded as of Arabian origin, however much it may have been cultivated and extended in that country. It flourished at a very early period in Egypt, and the late discoveries in that "land of marvels" have shown an extended acquaintance with various arts and sciences as exercised in the different manufactures, of which representations are to be found in the tombs and excavations of a very early date. Without some know-

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Thomas Joseph Pettigrew

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

ledge of chemistry the Egyptians could never have excelled, as they have done, in the making of glass, of linen, in dyeing, in the use of mordaunts, &c. Their manufacture of metals, particularly of gold—the whole process of which is represented in the tombs of Beni Hassan and at Thebes—into various ornaments; their gold wire, their gilding, &c. exhibit great ability, and could not have been effected without some knowledge of metallurgy. Their embalmings also display an acquaintance with chemistry. The Egyptian manuscripts hitherto discovered have not afforded any particular light into the extent of their knowledge; but several papyri have been found to contain certain formula; and one, a bilingual manuscript (being Enchorial and Greek) was examined by my late friend, Professor Reuvens, the conservator of the Museum of Antiquities at Leyden, and was found to treat of magical operations, and to contain upwards of one hundred chemical and alchymical formulæ.

It has been usual to ascribe the introduction of alchymy to Pythagoras, to Solomon, or rather to Hermes, and it has not unfrequently been called the Hermetical science. Gibbon has shown that the Greeks were inattentive either to the use or the abuse of chemistry, and that the immense collection of Pliny contains no instance of, or reference to, the transmutation of metals. He states the persecution of Diocletian to be the first authentic event in the history of alchymy. After the conquest of Egypt by the Arabs it spread over the globe.

The objects of the alchymists were to convert other metals into gold and silver, to remedy all diseases, and to prolong human life to an indefinite period.

“ A perfect medicine for bodies that be sick
Of all infirmities to be relieved;
This healeth nature and prolongeth lyfe eke.”

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

To attain such objects it is not surprising there should have been many aspirants; the credulity of man was speedily excited by the benefits held forth, and for a very long time an almost universal belief in the truth of the propositions was entertained.

The most celebrated ancient alchemists were Albertus Magnus, Roger Bacon, Raymund Lully, Arnoldus de Villa Nova, John Isaac Hollandus, Basil Valentine, Paracelsus, and Van Helmont.

The importance of chemical investigations and processes, as applicable to medicine, was first shown by Paracelsus; metals being exposed by him to the action of different acids, various preparations were made, and are employed in medicine with benefit, to the present day. Tinctures, essences, and extracts have from his time superseded the useless syrups and decoctions previously employed.

The desire of transmuting base metals into gold has called into exercise the worst passions of mankind—

“To seech by *alkimy* greate ryches to winn.”

(NORTON'S *Ordinall*, p. 6.)

Thus a love of riches sprang out of the pursuit of chemical science; and, considering the extraordinary operations connected with the study and the decompositions that have been effected, it is perhaps scarcely surprising that so many men of considerable talent should have become so infatuated. Many, doubtless, like Peter Hopkins,* studied alchemy for the pure love of speculation and curious inquiry, not with the slightest intention of ever pursuing it for the desire of riches. Many liked it because it was mysterious. There have also been royal alchemists, driven probably to the entertainment of a

* Doctor, vol. iii. p. 102.

Cambridge University Press

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Thomas Joseph Pettigrew

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

ALCHYMY.

9

vain hope by the extravagances and profligacy of their lives. Henry VI., according to Evelyn,* endeavoured to recruit his empty coffers by recourse to alchymy. Henry IV. had enacted a statute prohibiting the craft of multiplication. None were permitted to multiply gold or silver, under pain of felony. Henry VI. repealed this statute and published a patent *authoritate Parliamenti*, which has been given by Prynne in his ‘*Aurum Reginae*,’ and in which the monarch tells his subjects that the happy hour was drawing nigh when, by the discovery of the philosopher’s stone, he should be enabled to pay all the debts of the nation in real gold and silver.

Elias Ashmole, who styles himself *Mercuriophilus Anglicus*, has collected together in his ‘*Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*’ (Lond. 1652, 4to,) many curious poetical† pieces on alchymy. He states that his adopted father, Backhouse, an astrologer, bequeathed to him, *in syllables*, the true matter of the philosopher’s stone as a legacy; by which, as D’Israeli says, “we learn that a miserable wretch knew the art of making gold, yet always lived a beggar; and that Ashmole really imagined he was in possession of the syllables of a secret;” thus verifying Ben Jonson’s lines addressed to the alchymists:

“ If all you boast of your great art be true,
Sure, willing poverty lives most in you.”

The work of Ashmole to which I have alluded is perhaps the most curious record we have of the history of the follies, vain conceits, and incredible belief of the alchy-

* Numismata. Also, D’Israeli, *Curios. of Lit.* vol. i. p. 498.

† His reason for selecting poetical pieces is thus given: “To prefer prose before poetry is no other or better than to let a rough-hewen clowne take the wall of a rich-clad lady of honour, or to hang a presence chamber with tarpalin instead of tapestry.”

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Thomas Joseph Pettigrew

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

mists. He speaks with great caution of the philosopher's stone, "knowing enough to hold his tongue, but not enough to speake." Of its powers, however, he gives a particular account—as, he says, "a philosophical account of that eminent secret treasured up in the bosome of nature, which hath been sought for of many, but found by few." He describes also the mineral stone, the vegetable stone, the magical stone, and the angelicall stone; and prior to his description he solemnly tells us, "Incredulity is given to the world as a punishment."

The *mineral stone* hath the power of transmuting any imperfect earthy matter into its utmost degree of perfection; that is, to convert the basest of metals into perfect gold* and silver; flints into all manner of precious stones, as rubies, sapphires, emeralds, diamonds, &c.

The *vegetable stone*, by which Abraham, Moses, and Solomon wrought many wonders. The nature of man, beasts, fowls, fishes, all kinds of trees, plants, flowers, &c. may by this stone be made to grow, flourish, and bear fruit,—increase in colour, smell, &c. when and where and at whatever season of the year its possessor may please.

The *magical or perspective stone* makes a strict inquisition, discovers any person in any part of the world whatever, and enables you to understand the language of birds, beasts, &c.

The *angelicall stone* can neither be felt, seen, or weighed, but it can be tasted. It will lodge in the fire to eternity without being prejudiced. It hath a divine power, celestial and invisible, and endows the possessor with divine gifts. It affords the apparition of angels, and gives a power of conversing with them by dreams and revelations, nor dare any evil spirit approach the place where it is.

* "Gold, I confesse, is a delicious object, a goodly light, which we admire and gaze upon *ut pueri in Junonis avem.*"