CHAPTER FIVE

SALTS AND SALINE SPIRITS IN THE MEDICAL MARKETPLACE AND LITERATURE:
PATENT MEDICINES AND CHYMICAL SATIRE

In the last chapter, we observed that by the beginning of the eighteenth century, saline spirits or acids had largely replaced purely saline substances as the vital element in human physiology and natural history among natural philosophers and elite physicians. The advent of acid-alkali iatrochymistry and the influence of Newtonianism lessened the influence of Helmontian chymistry with its emphasis on vital salts. This chapter, in contrast, will analyze the continuing influence that salt chymistry had in wider society. We will concentrate on two areas, both having to do with the perceived “legitimacy” of salt iatrochymistry in medical treatment. First we will analyze the use of salts in patent medicines and popular medicaments, and secondly, we will examine the role that salt chymistry played in popular literature, primarily that which satirized alchemy and chymical medicine. Though much has been written by Rattansi, Webster, and Cook about chymical medicine among elites, including the attempt at the formation of a Society of Chymical Physicians in 1665, iatrochymistry at the popular medical level is something which necessitates more analysis. Likewise, there has been work about satire leveled at alchemists in general, but little about literature that took its inspiration from Helmontian salt chymistry, despite its pervasive influence among natural philosophers and physicians. As the work of Nummedal on chymists of the Holy Roman

Empire has shown, the question of legitimacy in chymical practice is also something of current historiographic interest.  

**Salts, Patent Medicine and Astrology**

As many studies of early modern history of medicine have demonstrated, the medical marketplace in England was a diverse one, with apothecaries, barber-surgeons, licensed and unlicensed physicians, and chymical empirics competing for business. The general lack of effectiveness of most remedies, as well as the high cost of licensed medical care meant that patients were likely to seek several alternatives. From the housewife making herbal remedies to treat her children, to the valetudinarian Robert Boyle’s preoccupation with various nostrums, medical knowledge was of great concern to the larger population.

By the mid seventeenth century, proprietary medicines or mass-marketed “quack remedies” emerged in the English medical marketplace. As one of the editors of the early eighteenth-century London newspaper *The British Apollo* opined, any “Nostrum of some Never-born Doctor…if expos’d to Sale at Tower-Hill, Lincolns-Inn or Moore-Fields, twill yield a Summ of Money as soon as any other valuable commodity.” Previously, as Cook has mentioned, more “orthodox” physicians, beginning in the seventeenth century, avoided charges of quackery and flogging their wares by refraining from using broadsheets; rather they would write short pamphlets about their medicaments which were more respectable. Advertisements in the late-seventeenth and early eighteenth-century

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