CHAPTER FIVE

THE RECESSION OF MEDIEVAL PRACTICAL MEDICINE IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY:
THE CASE OF ARNAU DE VILANOVA

It may seem otiose to return to the question of Arnau’s Renaissance reception after the excellent and thorough examination they it has received very recently in Sebastià Giralt i Soler’s Arnau de Vilanova en la imprenta renaixentista of 2002.¹ With the benefit of his work, I have chosen to pursue two related questions raised by the transmission of learned medical knowledge in this period: how did publishers select their copy, and did this change as print culture developed? What was the status of medieval medical texts, and how did this evolve? These general questions will lead me to offer some reflections on the mediation of Arnau’s medical works in particular, and on the role two of his editors and commentators played in this process. The context in which I wish to consider Arnau’s works is principally that of medieval writers on ‘practica’ (pathology, therapeutics, hygiene) rather than ‘theoria’ (physiology, etiology and semiology).² Up to 1400, new writers (‘neoterici’; ‘recentiores’) in this area whose works enjoyed scribal transmission—many of them in the form of pathologies from head to toe in the wake of Avicenna and the Liber ad Almansorem by Rhazes—include (with Arnau) the twelfth-century Salernitan doctor Nicolaus Praepositus, Gilbert the Englishman (fl. 1250), Dino del Garbo (d. 1280), Taddeo Alderotti (1223–1303), Bernard of Gordon (1283–1320), Nicolò Bertrucci (d. 1347), Gentile da Foligno (d. 1348), Pietro Torrigiano (1270–1350), John of Gaddesden (1280?–1361), Tommaso del Garbo

¹ Sebastià Giralt i Soler, Arnau de Vilanova en la imprenta renaixentista, Barcelona: Publicacions de l’Arxiu Històric de les Ciències de la Salut, Col·legi Oficial de Metges de Barcelona, 2002.

² I am excluding from consideration his theological texts (as Arnau’s earliest editors do), the alchemical texts attributed to him (and their uptake by such editors as Antoine Mizauld), texts in the vernacular (such as the Le tresor des pouvres incorrectly attributed to Arnau), and the equally spurious attribution of the Regimen salernitanum.
In the fifteenth-century, the majority of writers in this field whose works survived until the advent of printing were Italians, among them Ugo Benzi (1376–1448), Antonio Guainerio (d. 1440), Bartolommeo de Montagnana (d. 1460), Michele Savonarola (d. 1461), Giovanni Arcolani (c. 1390–1458), Gianmatteo Ferrari de Gradi (d. 1472), and Marco Gatinaria (d. 1496). In an excellent essay on medieval medicine, Vivian Nutton notes this growing emphasis on practica as one of the achievements of fifteenth-century medicine (together with a growing rejection of authority and lively debates about alchemy, astrology, and even magic), and ends with the following observation:

The fact that most writings of the fifteenth century remain in manuscript, or that those books of medicine and science printed before 1500 are more likely to contain works from the twelfth century or earlier than from the fifteenth is not interpreted as a consequence of a book-trade seeking solid profit in standard authors and medical set-texts, but a judgement on the quality of medical learning.4

This (implicitly false) conclusion from the evidence may be plausible in relation to the very beginnings of printing; but it is difficult to uphold in relation to the end of the incunable period (1500 to 1520), when all these names, as well as their predecessors, were linked to the achievements of pre-humanistic medicine and were considered early as candidates for printing, as we shall see.

In the very early years of the new technology, the choice of copy was determined in some cases by the commissions printers received; in others, it was related to the staple products of scriptoria, such as set academic texts and major liturgical or devotional works. But as those engaged in the new industry began to move beyond books destined both for local consumption and for known purchasers, and to engage in speculative production in an ever-widening market, it is not so clear what governed their choice. General protestations about service to the

---

3 Cf. the comment of Lynn Thorndike, *Science and thought in the fifteenth century*, New York: Hafner, 1929, 18: ‘in medicine the works of Marsilius de Sancta Sophia Junior […] and Jacopo da Forli […] by the time of Michael Savonarola, about twenty years later “occupy all the schools of our time”.’