CHAPTER FOUR

THE PRINT CULTURE AND VETERINARY MEDICINE

Amongst many temporall [sic] Benefits which Divine Bounty hath in several ages manifested to mankinde [sic] the invention of the Mystery, of Art of Printing may rightly be acknowledged one of the greatest, as an exact and exquisite Instrument, opening to the understanding, not only all natural Sciences, but even supernaturall [sic] Mysteries.1

As the previous chapter illustrated, there were a large number of people involved in the health care of domesticated animals who were unable to fend for themselves.2 There were a variety of medical options available, many of which could be purchased in the medical marketplace, while others were available by bartering or for free. The hierarchy of animal practitioners began with members of the Company of Farriers, followed by a range of what might now be called ‘non-professional’ healers. In common with human health care, it seems likely that in most cases the initial, and sometimes only medical intervention, would be that administered in a domestic setting by lay-healers.

There were many ways in which both ‘professional’ and ‘non-professional’ healers could have gained their medical knowledge. Before the advent of mechanical printing in the late fifteenth century most medical information would have been disseminated through the oral culture. Peter Murray Jones has suggested that prior to 1375 the relatively small numbers of manuscript texts being produced would have been mainly used by one of two groups. The first were university students, followed by the somewhat amorphous ‘highly educated readers’. Animal practitioners, of course, would automatically have been excluded from the first category and were unlikely to fall into the latter. There were also a number of Middle English manuscripts either written for or owned by highly trained physicians, joined by a number of

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1 W. Ball, A Briefe Treatise Concerning the Regulating of Printing (London, 1651), sig. A3r.
vernacular ‘lower level’ medical texts in the later part of the middle-
ages, which might have been used by veterinary practitioners.3

The development of printing dramatically transformed the way in
which all types of medical knowledge could be transmitted and dissemi-
nated. For the first time, large numbers of identical images could be pro-
duced quickly and cheaply and distributed nationally. Topics such as
health, medicine and diet proved to be particularly popular and resulted
in a wide range of publications which targeted all segments of the literate
public. By the seventeenth century, such works had become one of the
most profitable segments of the western European publishing trade.4

The relationship between the print culture and medical beliefs and
practices has been the topic of growing interest to academics over the
past few decades. A number of studies have suggested that the print
culture had a major impact on contemporary medical beliefs and prac-
tices in every stratum of early modern English society.5 However, in
common with most modern works on medical beliefs and practices
during this period, the discussions focus almost exclusively on human
health care. This is hardly surprising, given the generally anthropocen-
tric attitudes about early veterinary history in general. However, it is a
grave oversight, as the wealth of contemporary English language works
on animal health care provides the strongest evidence and examples of
veterinary beliefs and practices in the early modern period.

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