

## Portrait of a Surgeon in Fifteenth-Century England<sup>1</sup>

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The late medieval period witnessed a passionate struggle by physicians and surgeons for the professionalization of medicine. Endeavoring to distinguish themselves from medieval Europe's "broader set of healers" and thereby establish themselves "as the highest rung of a hierarchy of practitioners," physicians and surgeons went to great lengths to elevate their status in the public eye.<sup>2</sup> Their campaign for supremacy in the medical hierarchy played out in a number of different ways. Christian rhetoric, in particular, laid a strong foundation for the lofty status physicians and surgeons hoped to achieve. They were quick to exploit the spiritual facet of medicine to encourage an idealized conception of elite medical practitioners. Exemplified best in the figure of *Christus Medicus* (Christ the Physician), the powerful association between God and the medical profession in the Christian world extends back at least as far as St Augustine of Hippo, who declared: "[I]ike a skilled physician, the Lord knew better what was going on inside the patient than the patient himself. In the case of bodily infirmities, human physicians do what the Lord also is able to do in infirmities of the soul."<sup>3</sup> The passage of time and place only intensified this analogy. A fourteenth-century English preacher's manual underscores the strong bonds between medical practitioners and the divine:

Christ comes as a good physician to heal us. Christ acts like a physician in the following way. A doctor investigates the condition of the sick person and the nature of his sickness by such methods as taking his pulse and inspecting his urine. Thus when Christ visits a sinner, he first enlightens him with his grace to understand himself and his own sin, so

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  - 2 Katharine Park, "Medicine and Society in Medieval Europe, 500–1500," in *Medicine in Society: Historical Essays*, ed. Andrew Wear, et al. (Cambridge: CUP, 1992), p. 59; Faith Wallis, ed., *Medieval Medicine: A Reader* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2010), p. 361.
  - 3 As cited in R. Arbesmann, "The Concept of 'Christus Medicus' in St Augustine," *Traditio* 10 (1954): 19–20.

that he may repent of his sins and shun them. . . . Second, after diagnosing the sickness he gives the sick person a diet as he requires and prescribes what he should eat and what he should avoid; this means that Christ teaches us to avoid the occasions of sin and to seek the occasions for practising the virtues. Third, after he has prescribed and worked out a diet, he gives the sick person some syrup, an electuary, or some other medicine against the sickness to expel it; that is, Christ gives him contrition of his sins, which is made from bitter herbs. . . . Fourth when the sick person is healed, he warns him against relapsing, and teaching him how to live, so that he fosters in him a good intention to lead a good life.<sup>4</sup>

Elite medical practitioners supported and encouraged this association. Bryon Grigsby argues that the celebrity of some medieval physicians was tied directly to their relationship with Christ: “[w]hile Christ was thought to be the perfect physician, his followers also gain acclaim as healers and curers.”<sup>5</sup> Carole Rawcliffe makes a similar argument, saying “[f]ar from denigrating the skill of earthly practitioners, which to modern eyes seems all too fragile and limited, these ideas reinforced the image of the ‘good physician’, following in the steps of *Christus Medicus*.”<sup>6</sup> Of course, God was also the ultimate scapegoat when medical treatment failed to produce results: there was a “clear awareness that, in the last resort, God, not man, would decide the outcome of so perilous an undertaking.”<sup>7</sup>

Adoption and reinforcement of the ideology of *Christus Medicus* was just one way in which elite medical practitioners attempted to enhance their reputations. Nevertheless, it is critical to acknowledge that surgeons faced much

4 From *Fasciculus Morum: A Fourteenth-Century Preacher’s Manual*, as cited in Carole Rawcliffe, *Medicine & Society in Later Medieval England* (London: Alan Sutton, 1995), p. 58.

5 Bryon Grigsby, “Medical Misconceptions,” in *Misconceptions about the Middle Ages*, ed. Stephen J. Harris and Bryon Grigsby (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 145. This attitude was not unique to the English. In his discussion of physicians who worked in Renaissance hospitals, John Henderson notes that “[p]ublic appreciation of their social role in looking after the bodies of the sick poor was matched by appreciation of their religious role in making available to their patients the spiritual medicine provided by *Christus Medicus*.” John Henderson, *The Renaissance Hospital: Healing the Body and Healing the Soul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 135.

6 Carole Rawcliffe, “More than a Bedside Manner: the Political Status of the Late Medieval Court Physician,” in *St George’s Chapel, Windsor, in the Late Middle Ages*, ed. C. Richmond and E. Scarff (Leeds: Maney Pub., 2001), p. 85.

7 Carole Rawcliffe, “Sickness and Health,” in *Medieval Norwich*, ed. Rawcliffe and Richard Wilson (London: Hambledon, 2004), p. 302.