

“The Wounded Surgeon”: Devotion, Compassion and Metaphor in Medieval England

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In the second of the *Four Quartets*, T.S. Eliot draws upon a millennium and a half of *Christus medicus* “Christ the physician” imagery:¹

The wounded surgeon plies the steel
That questions the distempered part;
Beneath the bleeding hands we feel
The sharp compassion of the healer’s art
Resolving the enigma of the fever chart.²

The pain and compassion of surgeon and patient are here reciprocal. The “wounded” surgeon operates with “bleeding hands,” and the patient “feels” “the sharp compassion” as though it were a material scalpel incising flesh. This interior practice, whether understood as physical dissection or penetrative empathy, parses the external and more abstract “fever chart.” Eliot extends the image of physician into a more specific image of surgery.

Surgery, with its unique concurrence of harming and healing, opening and sealing, punishing and curing, generates particular imaginative possibilities as a metaphor in medieval texts, beyond the trope of *Christus medicus* and general analogies of spiritual and medical healing. In addressing the rise of surgical imagery in Middle English poetry, such as the *Siege of Jerusalem* and the Pearl-Poet’s *Cleanness*, Jeremy Citrome argues that surgery is more spiritu-

1 John T. McNeill and Helena M. Gamer, *Medieval Handbooks of Penance: A Translation of the Principal Libri Poenitentiales and Selections from Related Documents* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1938), 44–50; John T. McNeill, “Medicine for Sin as Prescribed in the Penitentials,” *Church History* 1 (1932): 14–26; and Rudolph Arbesmann, “The Concept of *Christus Medicus* in St. Augustine,” *Traditio* 10 (1954): 1–28. See also: Shelley Annette Reid, “The First Dispensation of Christ is Medicinal’: Augustine and Roman Medical Culture,” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of British Columbia, 2008).

2 T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), 18.

ally dextrous than medicine as surgery can be both punitive and restorative.³ Surgical incision and amputation by the surgeon-priest appear in confessional texts from medieval England.⁴ However, during this same period, the late fourteenth century and fifteenth century, *Christus chirurgus* “Christ the surgeon” also emerges in religious texts.

Rather than the punitive, surgical model of corrosive purging and excommunicative severing charted by Citrome and others, Christ the surgeon is compassionate. Christ the surgeon incorporates the more traditional and popular meditative aide, Christ’s wound, inviting the faithful to meditate on His wound as though their own. Although attained through torture rather than medical intervention, His crucifixion wound becomes a surgical wound when Christ adopts the role of a surgeon to attach the faithful to it. Likewise, the surgical wound of the circumcision serves as a location for compassionate healing by spurring reflection upon the pain and humanity shared by the infant Christ. Placing images of Christ the wounded surgical patient and Christ the surgeon, compactly phrased as Eliot’s “wounded surgeon,” in dialogue, reveals how surgery generates unique opportunities for compassion in pastoral and devotional texts of late medieval England. Surgery provides a medical understanding of compassion, how the pain of the wound may be felt within another body part, and even felt by another person. These passages – in sermons such as the fifteenth-century Oxford sermon collection Bodley 649 and the fifteenth-century cycle edited as *Lollard Sermons*, devotional texts such as Nicholas Love’s *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ* and *Speculum devotorum*, and mystical visions such as the Middle English translation of Bridget of Sweden’s *Liber celestis* and Julian of Norwich’s *Revelation of Love* – align Christ’s wounds suffered at the circumcision or the crucifixion with the human wounds of sin, offering a metaphorical and physiological treatment of compassion.

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- 3 Jeremy Citrome, *The Surgeon in Medieval English Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006). Cf. Michael Livingston, “‘The Depth of Six Inches’: Prince Hal’s Head-Wound at the Battle of Shrewsbury,” 215–30; Iain A. MacInnes, “Heads, Shoulders, Knees and Toes: Injury and Death in Anglo-Scottish Combat, c. 1296-c. 1403,” 102–27; Carmel Ferragud, “Wounds, Amputations, and Expert Procedures in the City of Valencia in the Early-Fifteenth Century,” 233–51; and Timothy May, “Spitting Blood: Medieval Mongol Medical Practices,” 175–93; Debby Banham and Christine Voth, “The Diagnosis and Treatment of Wounds in the Old English Medical Collections: Anglo-Saxon Surgery?,” 153–74; and Larissa Tracy, “‘Into the hede, throw the helme and creste’: Head Wounds and a Question of Kingship in the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*,” 496–518, in this volume.
- 4 Virginia Langum, “Discerning Skin: Complexion, Surgery, and Language in Medieval Confession,” in *Reading Skin in Medieval Culture*, ed. Katie L. Walter (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 141–160.