‘Because my son does not read Latin’
Rhetoric, competition and education in Middle Dutch surgical handbooks

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Summary

Two late medieval handbooks of surgery, written in Middle Dutch, are used here as sources for answering the question: which value did book-learning and formal education offer to non-academic late medieval surgeons? The authors, the Flemish surgeons Jan Yperman (†ca. 1330) and Thomaes Scellinck van Thienen (fl. 1343), probably both lacked a university education, and wrote in the vernacular. In their works, they employed the fiercest rhetoric possible against the empirics or lay surgeons. Their knowledge of surgery was much less than that of Yperman or Scellinck, and accordingly, the variety in their remedies was very poor. Therefore, the lay surgeons’ results were bad, and it was shameful and a disgrace that they could actually practice the way they did. These and similar accounts of lay surgery, coming from the learned tradition of surgery, have often been believed at face value. However, close-reading of the surgical texts provides a much more nuanced image of lay surgeons as confident practitioners, sharing the medical discourse of their more learned colleagues. Lack of knowledge may even have benefitted surgical practice, as the predictable remedies of empirics presumably appeared far less threatening than the varied and sometimes invasive techniques of learned surgeons. Furthermore, lay surgeons were not hampered by academic scruples in claiming the most fantastic cures, which may have benefitted their bussiness on the competitive medical market of the late Middle Ages.

The Flemish Middle Ages proved an extremely fertile ground for surgical writing in the vernacular. Not only was almost every large Latin surgical manual translated in Middle Dutch. Two Flemish

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2 Huizenga (2003).
surgeons, Jan Yperman († ca. 1330) and Thomaes Scellinck van Thienen (fl. 1343), wrote extensive, original handbooks in their vernacular language.3

By doing this, they constructed a new genre of medical education, yet building strongly on the Latin tradition of surgical handbooks. Both named as their motivation to endeavour on such a grand enterprise the ignorance of their sons. As they had not learnt Latin, their fathers were forced to convey their knowledge of surgery in Middle Dutch.

Now, scholars have searched for archival traces of Flemish sons of great surgeons, and nothing has been found. The son-topos was a modest and elegant explanation for sure, and this was only the first of the rhetorical features of their writing.

In this article, I will try to answer the following question: which value did book-learning and formal education offer to non-academic late medieval surgeons? The place of learning and education in surgery was an important topic in the Flemish surgical handbooks, intimately connected with the competition between learned and lay surgeons. The special place of the non-academic, yet learned surgeon should be realized in this context. He was separated from two other groups of surgical practitioners: the academic, learned surgeon, and the lay surgeon or empiric. As will be shown later, academic surgeons occupied a much more clearly defined place in the medical hierarchy than learned, non-academic surgeons writing in the vernacular. On the other extreme, the group of empirics or uneducated practitioners was a large and fluid one, composed of many different types of healers. As far as far the most of these lay surgeons have not left handbooks or other easily accessible traces, not much is known about the group of empirics. Michael McVaugh warns that modern researchers should not be prejudiced: some of the empirical, wandering eye healers of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries wrote specialized Latin ophthalmologic treatises.4 However, it will be assumed here that the majority of the lay surgeons or empirics, which were mentioned by Yperman and Scellinck, had not received much formal education, and that their knowledge did not come from books, but from practice only. When speaking about empirics, lay healers, or uneducated surgeons, I will focus on this group.

Yperman and Scellinck eagerly tried to define their superior type of surgery against the surgery of the many lay practitioners. This may

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3 Van Leersum (1912); van Leersum (1928).