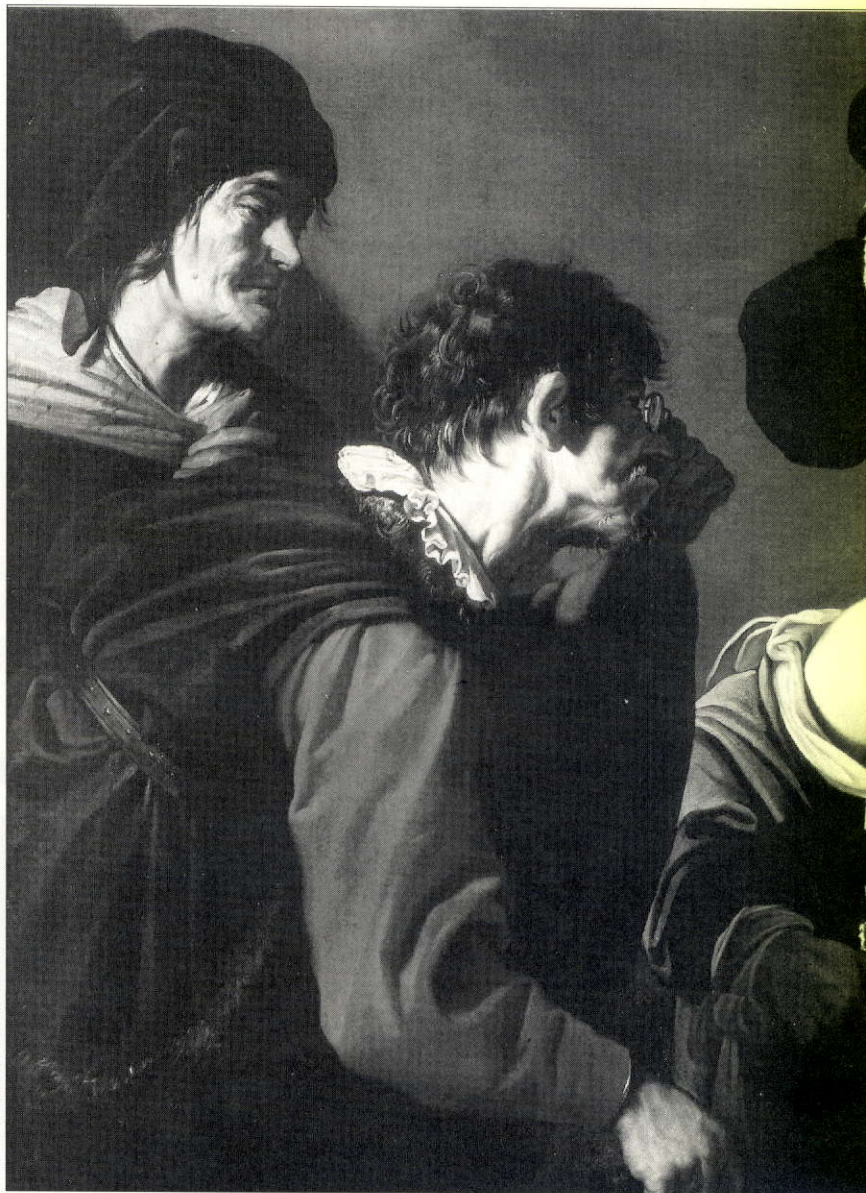


# SORDIDOUS Scumme: QUACKERY IN THE T

BY LIZ MILNER

No Tudor market or fairground would be complete without its complement of quacks, those itinerant healers and performers who blended outrageous medical claims with madcap physical and verbal comedy. The seeds of the advertising, entertainment, and medical industries found fertile ground among what Elizabethan commentator John Oberndorf termed, "[these] abject and sordidous scumme and refuse of the people ... slow-bellied monks, toothless and tattling old wives, chattering char-women, long-tongued mid-wives, dog leeches and such like baggage."

The Art Archive / Museo del Prado Madrid



Detail of painting by Flemish artist Theodor Rombouts, 1597-1637. *The Charlatan on*

While medical fraud is ageless, quackery is a relatively new phenomenon brought about by the growth of cities during the Renaissance. At that time, healing became a form of popular entertainment. The term "quack" was coined to describe the new style of healers who went through the market-places shouting or "quacking-up" their cure-alls. The quacks would attract a crowd through a performance that could include conjuring tricks, trained animals, music, dance, acrobatics, and humorous patter. When a big enough crowd had formed, the quack would talk up the virtues of his medicines, "cure" a member of the audience (usually a confederate who was planted in the crowd), and sell his or her wares.

There were many kinds of "quack" healers. "Wise women" and midwives dispensed time-tested (primarily herbal) folk remedies. Astrological healers such as Simon Foreman used astrological charts in diagnoses and then treat-

# ME OF THE TUDORS



h Puller, 1620-25. Located at the Museo del Prado, Madrid.

ed their patients with an eclectic mix of folk and Galenic medicine. Towards the end of Queen Elizabeth's reign, quacks co-opted the holy grail of alchemy: the Philosopher's Stone. The Philosopher's Stone was the building block for all creation. Not only could it be used to turn base metal into gold, it could yield the elixir of life, also known as "Aurum Potabile," i.e., "drinkable gold." The elixir of life could cure any wound or illness, prevent or reverse aging, and possibly confer immortality on those lucky enough to drink it.

The Elizabethan marketplace abounded in bogus "elixirs of life." One notable quack, Francis Anthony, published a recipe for "Aurum Potabile," the ingredients of which included gold, tin, vinegar, ashes, and horse dung, to be drunk in a pint of Canary Sack.

## Quackery: Equal Opportunity for All

The rise of quackery also stimulated a host of related enterprises. Women, who were banned from acting on the stage, made careers performing in quack shows where they might play any role from an acrobat to a miraculously healed member of the audience. The printing industry got a boost from quackery as the quacks discovered that the printed handbill was a perfect way to broadcast news of their services. Even glassmakers benefited because each quack wanted his or her nostrums in distinctive bottles that would set their wares apart from a horde of imitators.

Quackery threatened the status quo for it gave women, foreigners, and other marginal groups a toehold in the City's economy. While physicians were all male and upper class, quackery was an equal-

opportunity profession that attracted women and men of all classes and levels of education. The romantically named female quack, Thomazine Scarlet, for example, confessed in 1588 that she “knew nothing of Physick” and could “neither read nor write, yet had hundreds ... to whom she gave medicine.”

It wasn't just quacks like Thomazine Scarlet who dabbled in medicine. Concocting cures was a favorite pastime for all levels of society. Herbalist Barbara Griggs writes that Henry VIII's book of remedies included 114 favorite recipes. Even Sir Thomas More got into the act. Shortly before his execution, More “cast his water” (a sixteenth-century form of urinalysis) and made the ironic diagnosis that the patient might live a long time “if it not be the king's pleasure he should die.”

### Surgeons, Barbers, and King Henry VIII

When I began research for this article, I'd assumed that the rise of quackery was due to a loss of priestly healers as a result of the dissolution of the monasteries. This was not the case. A papal edict issued in 1163 forbade priests from touching blood. The barbers who, up until then, had been the priests' assistants took over minor surgery. By the sixteenth century, the trades of barber and surgeon often overlapped. Surgeons, who learned their skills through serving as apprentices to experienced surgeons (often on the battlefield), tended to serious wounds and operations. Barbers were more likely to engage in tooth-drawing, bloodletting and, of course, haircutting and shaving. Only the physicians had university training and their curriculum was purely theoretical. They studied the works of Galen and disdained empirical methods and herbal remedies.

In an odd way, King Henry VIII can be said to be the father of English quackery. Before Henry's reign, medical practice was almost entirely unregulated. His statute of 1511, “An Act for the Appointing of Physicians and Surgeons,” attempted to professionalize medicine by separating university educated practitioners from the itinerate herbalists, folk healers, nostrum sellers, astrologers, and midwives. Henry's statute established the first mechanism for licensing heal-

The Act was intended to protect the public from “...a great multitude of ignorant persons ... smiths, weavers, and women, [who] take upon them great cures ... to the high displeasure of God, and the grievous hurt, damage and destruction of many of the King's liege people.”

The statute required medical practitioners located in the City of London or within a seven-mile radius of the City to be tested by the Bishop of London or the Dean of St Paul's Cathedral, with the assistance of four physicians or surgeons. Outside of London's seven-

mile radius, the examination was to be conducted by the bishop of each diocese, again with the assistance of four physicians or surgeons. Oxford and Cambridge universities retained their rights to issue licenses to practice.

Even after Henry's statute, the lines between professionals and quacks were vague. Andrew Borde, for example, was a personal physician to the king who played both sides of the field. In addition to attending the king and writing scholarly works on diet and health, he was a regular vendor of cures at markets and country fairs where his witty patter and frenetic antics made him legendary. The term “Merry Andrew,” meaning a speaker of nonsense, is said to have been inspired by his showmanship.

A mechanism was needed to enforce the statute, and in 1518, Henry chartered the College of Physicians. (Medical historian Roy Porter says the College only became “royal” during the reign of Charles II).

Before Henry created the College, medical fraud was dealt with in a haphazard way. While the Fellowship of Surgeons came into being in 1368-9 and the Company of Barbers was chartered in 1376, neither had the broad licensing and enforcement powers that Henry granted

to the College. The College established standards for licensing and policing medical practitioners and had the authority to reprimand, fine or imprison any medical practitioner who violated its rules.

Henry's attempt to separate the sheep from the goats had unintended consequences. London at that time had only 12 university-trained physicians and they used Henry's statute to create a monopoly by bringing legal action against their competition. While the physicians' cures may not have been effective, their writs were. Scores of unlicensed healers were disciplined, fined, and impris-



Village market scene with quack or charlatan by Italian artist Graneri. Private collection.



oned. They were pressured to either quit their medical activities or leave London.

Londoners soon found that the cure for quackery was worse than the disease. The licensed doctors were under the sway of the theories of Galen which held that all diseases are caused by imbalances in the four humors: blood, phlegm, black bile, and yellow bile. Often their remedies for bringing the humors back into balance—bleeding, purging, and dosing patients with noxious substances such as arsenic and mercury—were more dangerous and painful than those of the banished herbalists and empirics. The doctors would only treat those who paid their exorbitant fees, so the poor soon found that they had no access to medical treatment at all.

To remedy this, King Henry VIII promulgated a second statute in 1542. This Bill chastised greedy physicians and made it lawful for anyone "having knowledge and experience of the nature of herbs, roots and waters ... to practice ... without penalty." In other words, herbalists were no longer to be subject to regulation by the College of Medicine.

A goat's kidney stone, supposed to have healing powers. Gold and emeralds from the new world, tripod of lions. First half 16th CE. H: 20,5 cm. Location: Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria.



Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY

The later history of Henry's second statute presents a perfect demonstration of the law of unintended consequences. Laws intended to regulate unlicensed medical practitioners had the paradoxical effect of liberating them from regulation. The vague phrasing of the Act made enforcement so difficult that the statute became known as "The Quack's Charter." It paved the way for the Golden Age of Quackery during the reign of the Stuarts when the convergence of new media in the form of the printed handbill, the exponential growth in London's population, and the spread of a new and baffling disease, syphilis, combined to create a thriving market for the miraculous cures that only quacks could offer.

## QUACK REMEDIES

### Black Plague

"One quack, Simon Kellaway, published his own *Defensive Against the Plague*, allegedly full of advice on how to avoid becoming infected. Those who could not afford to buy the whole book were able to purchase its most practical hint on a small piece of paper. After paying for it, they opened it up to discover Kellaway's great preventative was 'Fuge Loci'—flee the place!"

—Judith Cook, *Dr. Simon Forman: A Most Notorious Physician*.

### An "Infallible Antidote" for Plague

Take almost half a glassful of your own water (of the morning water), beat with 2 or 3 spoonfuls of it a little rue and a little aspium [wild celery or parsley] not half a handful of each. Squeeze out all their juice hard. Drink...and you need not fear.  
 —Suzanne W. Hull, *Women According to Men: The World of Tudor-Stuart Women*.

### Toothache pain

"For mere Toothache try grey worms breathing under the wood



**The Cure For Folly, by Hieronymus Bosch, hangs in the Museo del Prado, Madrid. Extraction of the fool's stone was an often repeated theme in Flemish painting.**

or stones having many feet and when they be touched do they cluster together like porkenpickes...pierced together with a bodkin... and then put into the tooth that aches..."

—John Hollybush, *A most Excellent and Perfect Homish Apothecary* (London 1561), quoted in *Elizabeth's London: Everyday Life in Elizabethan London* by Eliza Picard.

●The word "quack" may derive from "quacksalver," a Dutch word meaning a "boaster who applies a salve," or from the German word "quacksalber" which means "questionable salesperson." In the Middle Ages the word quack itself meant "shouting." Cognates for the word "Quack" include charlatan, derived from the Italian, ciarlatano, which means someone who speaks in boastful and confusing way, and mountebank, from the Italian phrase 'monta in banco,' (i.e., "gets up on a bench"). —*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language: Fourth Edition* (2000); Wikipedia; Dictionary.com.

●Quacks were flamboyant showmen and spellbinding speakers. Elizabethan surgeon William Clowes describes a "miraculous surgeon" as: "... fleering and jeering, floriously glittering like the man in the moon, with his bracelets about his arms, therein many jewels and stones of St. Vincent's rocks [sparkly quartz mined near Bristol], his fingers full of rings, a silver case with instruments hanging at his girdle and a gilt spatula sticking in his hat..."

—Eliza Picard, *Everyday Life in Elizabethan London*

