


THE SOCIETY OF CHEMICAL PHYSICIANS, THE NEW PHILOSOPHY, AND THE RESTORATION COURT*

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 In its day, the short-lived Society of Chemical Physicians threatened to undermine both the academic physic and the corporate privileges of the College of Physicians of London. In early 1665, Thomas O'Dowde led an attempt to obtain a royal charter for the new medical organization in London. Since 1617, however, when the Society of Apothecaries was created, no new medical institution had been established in the metropolis. Further, public proposals to gain a charter for the Society of Chemical Physicians had intellectual as well as professional implications, since support for the Society was interpreted by some as an indication that many members of the Court found the "new" or "experimental" philosophy to be an increasingly attractive alternative to natural philosophies rooted in academic tradition. Manifest support at Court for the Society meant that the intellectual as well as the institutional standards of the medical status quo were being subverted, although, in the end, the Society of Chemical Physicians failed to obtain its charter.

The existence of the Society was first brought to light in 1953, through the posthumous publication of an article by Sir Henry Thomas which was based upon the discovery of a seventeenth-century broadside. This bit of medical ephemera—recovered by the staff of the Department of Printed Books of the British Museum from a pasteboard wrapping—was an advertisement published by the Society of Chemical Physicians during the last important outbreak of the plague in London, in 1665. Thomas developed the context for the broadside through a careful reading of some of the books published by chemical physicians of the Restoration, creating a story whose details have not been altered since.¹

Albeit unchanged in its details, the story of the Society of Chemical Physicians has become a stalking horse for various interpretations of medi-

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¹ Sir Henry Thomas, "The Society of Chymical Physitians: An Echo of the Great Plague of London, 1665," in *Science, Medicine and History*, ed. E. Ashworth Underwood, 2 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), 2: 56–71.

cine during the Restoration in England, particularly following the publication of two important articles in the mid-1960s. P. M. Rattansi and Charles Webster have forcefully argued that the social context of the Restoration needs to be explored much more fully if we are to understand the intellectual debates of the period.² In his article, Rattansi first pointed to the significance of the Helmontians' courtly patronage. But the major thrust of his interpretation was that the Society represented Helmontian practitioners who had increased in influence over the course of the interregnum because of the changing social needs of the growing metropolis of London. The Helmontians, he argued, briefly and inadvertently became third parties in an older social conflict, that between the gentlemen physicians and the tradesmen apothecaries, in which the Helmontians sided with the apothecaries against the physicians.³

Charles Webster, upon discovering a plan by a member of the Hartlib circle to create a "College of Graduate Physicians" in 1656, came to see the Society of Chemical Physicians as an outgrowth of projects originated during the Puritan Commonwealth. Webster noted that whereas William Rand's "College" of 1656 was to have contained respectably qualified practitioners, the Society of 1665 was a much more heterogeneous group of both respectable and "mountebank" practitioners; moreover, Rand's group had been proposed during what Webster believed to be a period of weakness for the College of Physicians, whereas the Society of Chemical Physicians had been a "defensive gesture taken after the revival of the . . . licensing power [of the College of Physicians]." But, he argued, because the Hartlib circle had been essential to promoting the growth of chemistry in England and because of overlapping membership between it and the Society of Chemical Physicians, a basic continuity existed.⁴

The argumentative intentions of Webster and Rattansi to investigate the contexts of the 1660s through the history of the Society of Chemical Physicians have stood up very well, but the discovery of documents unknown to these authors makes it possible to offer a new interpretation of the Society and its meaning for the medicine of the 1660s. The interpretation of the Society's brief existence offered here suggests that it had little to do with the social needs of Londoners or the interests of apothecaries; nor was it the outcome of plans proposed during the interregnum. I propose that the Society of Chemical Physicians came to the fore only after the powers of the

² P. M. Rattansi, "The Helmontian-Galenist controversy in Restoration England," *Ambix*, 1964, 12: 1–23; and Charles Webster, "English medical reformers of the Puritan Revolution: a background to the 'Society of Chymical Physicians,'" *Ambix*, 1967, 14: 16–41. Allen G. Debus for the most part follows Rattansi's interpretation in his *The Chemical Philosophy: Paracelsian Science and Medicine in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, 2 vols. (New York: Science History Publications, 1977), 2: 510–11.

³ Rattansi, "Helmontian-Galenist controversy."

⁴ Webster, "English medical reformers"; also see his *The Great Instauration: Science, Medicine and Reform, 1626–1660* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1975), p. 307. Quotation is from "English medical reformers," p. 41.

College of Physicians had been seriously weakened; that the Society alienated apothecaries as well as physicians; and that, although it was indeed a heterogeneous group, the Society was in the main advanced by ambitious former royalists who played upon both the open-handed patronage and the intellectual sympathies evident among certain parties of the royal Court. Seen in this light, the story of the Society of Chemical Physicians can help illuminate why some proponents of learned physic thought themselves under attack not only by “Helmontian” chemists, but also by the “new” or “experimental” philosophy encouraged by certain groups at Court—a way of doing things from which not only intellectuals, but also medical empirics, could benefit.

If the royal Court was to be the source of patronage for the Society of Chemical Physicians, it had already been that for the College of Physicians. Lord Chancellor Wolsey’s patronage of the College was founded in large part upon a desire to defend academic medical learning. According to the preface of the College’s 1518 charter, Henry VIII founded the College in order to promote learned physic. That is, the physicians of the Court, foremost among them Thomas Linacre, were given the privilege of incorporating and licensing physicians in London so that their learned art could be furthered and dignified.⁵ The art of physic, obtained through long and arduous study in the universities, was rooted in philosophical learning stemming from the ancient sources, knowledge of which was essential to a practitioner of dietetic medicine. The philosophical learning in which physic was rooted helped the learned physician not only to cure the sick, but also to counsel clients on how to retain health and prolong life. Physic, then, was distinct from mere medicine, which concerned itself only with therapeutic ministrations to the sick.⁶ The physicians obtained fraternal protection from the competition of other practitioners in order to further the knowledge and dignity of physic.

By the end of the third decade of the seventeenth century, the College of Physicians, due to monarchical support, had come to exercise considerable power over the medical community of London. It both tried other practitioners in its capacity to sit as a court and subordinated the two other

⁵ George N. Clark, *A History of the Royal College of Physicians of London*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), 1: 58–66; Gweneth Whitteridge, “Some Italian precursors of the Royal College of Physicians,” *J. Roy. Coll. Phys. London*, 1977, 12: 67–80; Charles Webster, “Thomas Linacre and the Foundation of the College of Physicians,” in *Essays on the Life of Thomas Linacre, c. 1460–1524*, ed. Francis Maddison, Margaret Pelling, and Charles Webster (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), pp. 198–222. Also see James K. McGonica, *English Humanists and Reformation Politics under Henry VIII and Edward VI* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965).

⁶ For a discussion of the differences between the “science” of physic and the “craft” of medicine in the ancient world (a distinction upon which many discussions in the early modern period were based), see especially Ludwig Edelstein, “The Diетetics of Antiquity” and “The Relation of Ancient Philosophy to Medicine,” in his *Ancient Medicine*, ed. Owsei Temkin and C. Lilian Temkin, trans. C. Lilian Temkin (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1967), pp. 303–16, 349–66; and Owsei Temkin, “Greek medicine as science and craft,” *Isis*, 1953, 44: 213–25, reprinted in his *The Double Face of Janus* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), pp. 137–53.

local medical corporations, the United Company of Barber-Surgeons (established in 1540) and the Society of Apothecaries.⁷ But many medical practitioners in London, including those practicing chemical medicine, had long objected to the College's juridical authority. Any new medical corporation created around a body of practitioners of mere medicine would pose a clear threat to the College of Physicians' power and undermine respect for the principles of learned physic.

Such a threat was especially grave in the mid-1660s, because the College of Physicians had been having difficulties in retaining its institutional preeminence in the practice of physic in London. In April of 1664, the College's public authority was weakened when the House of Commons refused to ratify the College's new royal charter. Believing that they had the support of Lord Chancellor Clarendon, the College officers had looked forward to having their new charter passed, rectifying the powerlessness caused by a legal decision of 1656 that had undercut the powers obtained in a charter from Cromwell. The outcome of the decision of the Parliament in 1664 left the College of Physicians in a frail institutional and legal condition, and heightened its members' concerns about the dignity of academic physic.⁸

A significant indication of the kinds of public sentiments that helped to undermine the College's case in the Parliament can be found in a book written by an author known only as T.M.⁹ This work indicates that, in addition to the Society of Apothecaries and the Barber-Surgeons' Company, the virtuosi, or supporters of the new science, had also opposed the College's charter. Previous attempts to identify T.M. have been unconvincing.¹⁰ Whoever T.M. was, his book gives an illuminating explanation of why the House of Commons voted down the charter of the College of Physicians.

A brief summary of T.M.'s point of view is in order here. First he says that medicine is currently in an imperfect state. This has been caused by the introduction of divisions among physicians, apothecaries, and surgeons

⁷On the College's juridical authority in the early seventeenth century, see Harold J. Cook, "'Against common right and reason': the College of Physicians versus Dr. Thomas Bonham," *Amer. J. Legal Hist.*, 1985, 29: 301–22; also see Charles Webster, "William Harvey and the Crisis of Jacobean England," in *William Harvey and His Age: The Professional and Social Context of the Discovery of the Circulation*, ed. Jerome J. Bylebyl (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), pp. 1–27.

⁸The text of the proposed charter can be found at the British Library, Sloane 3914, fols. 100–103. Also see *House of Commons Journal*, 19 and 20 April 1664, 8: 546; and "Annals of the College of Physicians (1647–82)," 4, fols. 81b–84a.

⁹T.M., *A Letter Concerning the Present State of Physick, and the Regulation of the Practice of it in this Kingdom. Written to a Doctor here in London* (London, 1665).

¹⁰Most identifications of T.M. have assumed that he was a physician: the catalogue of the British Library, for instance, identifies him as Christopher Merrett, a Fellow of the College of Physicians, apparently on the strength of Merrett's involvement in the pamphlet wars that followed. But this identification is wanting. See R. S. Roberts, "Jonathan Goddard . . . a lost work or a ghost?" *Med. Hist.*, 1964, 8: 191. The title of T.M.'s book claims that the book is written "to" a doctor "here in London." Moreover, the only internal clues to the identity of the author are two claims: one, that he had a discourse with the virtuosi at Sir Thomas's house, and two, that "our House did not pass the Patent, by his majesty lately granted to the Colledge" (T.M., *A Letter*, pp. 4, 5). That is, he was associated with the virtuosi and also closely associated with, if not a member of, the House of Commons. But no medical practitioners were then members of Parliament; nor do the lists of members of the House of Commons and the Royal Society yield any probable author with the initials T.M., with letters of a name ending in T.M., or with the initials reversed ("M.T.").

during the “dark ages.” The ancients made medical advances because their physicians both gave advice and worked with their hands in preparing medicines and carrying out surgical operations. It would be good if the previous unity of medical practice could be restored, but since that is probably impossible, the best plan would be to reform the current practice of physic along experimental lines—to make the College of Physicians into an institution rather like the new Royal Society, which he praises highly.¹¹ T.M. then says that, to encourage further experimental learning in physic, the physicians should not send their prescriptions to be filled by apothecaries, but should make up their medicines themselves.¹² Finally, chemical medicines must be better incorporated into the practice of the physicians.¹³

This plan, if it were carried out, T.M. argued, would go beyond mere medical empiricism.¹⁴ It would make medicine into a science, “which is so universally the design of the present Age.”¹⁵ If the College of Physicians refused to initiate such a reform, however, “I could desire it may be thought advisable to provide for it by publick Authority”—that is, the king or the Parliament might step in to reform medicine if the physicians did not.¹⁶ T.M., then, proposed both an experimental solution and a largely chemical solution to the problems of the 1660s by emphasizing medicine over physic, and he raised the specter of institutional changes imposed by “publick Authority.”

In the wake of the Parliament’s decision against the College, the intellectual and political sentiments behind T.M.’s book found expression in a long work penned by Marchamont Nedham, which detailed the advantages of Helmontian medicine.¹⁷ A well-educated man, Nedham had become a chemical practitioner to help support himself when he first moved to London in the early 1640s, had studied chemistry without practicing while he was employed in other pressing pursuits, and then had practiced it again to earn a living sometime after Cromwell’s death.¹⁸ During the years when he only studied chemical medicine, Nedham was one of the most prolific propagandists of the interregnum, siding first with the Parliament, then with the Independents, then with the royalists, then with Cromwell. Politically a “classical republican,” Nedham had a sharp pen and a keen nose for the latest political possibilities.¹⁹ His salvo of late 1664—the first known piece

¹¹ T.M., *A Letter*, pp. 7–19.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 19–58.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 62–63.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 58–61.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 64–65.

¹⁷ Marchamont Nedham, *Medela Medicinæ. A Plea for the free Profession, and a Renovation of the Art of Physick, Out of the Noblest and most Authentick Writers* (London, 1665).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, sigs. A6–A6v.

¹⁹ Blair Worden, “Classical Republicanism and the Puritan Revolution,” in *History and Imagination*, ed. Hugh Lloyd-Jones, Valerie Pearl, and Blair Worden (London: Duckworth, 1981), pp. 182–200, esp. pp. 192–99; and Joseph Frank, *Cromwell’s Press Agent: A Critical Biography of Marchamont Nedham, 1620–1678* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1980).

by him printed after the Restoration, appearing within six months of the College's defeat in Parliament—very strongly identified Helmontianism with the “new philosophy” coming into vogue. When a man of Nedham's political and polemical experience spoke on behalf of his calling, the learned men of the College of Physicians listened anxiously.

The tones the physicians discerned in Nedham's argument disturbed many of them deeply. He argued that the learning acquired by the physicians in their long university educations served no good purpose other than to convince an ignorant public that the physicians were superior men. Behind their showy Latin phrases and references to anatomy lay nothing that could help cure anyone; nothing, that is, except what was already known to those who could read English. Old women imitated the physicians' venesections and herbal purges. Not only were the physicians' therapies used by the vulgar, however—they were also dangerous. The true medicine came from experiment and the intuition of the properly prepared initiate: the way of chemical medicine as reformulated by Jean Baptista van Helmont. Helmontian medicine could cure more diseases with less risk and more certain results than could Galenical medicine, argued Nedham.²⁰

Many parts of Nedham's argument had been heard before, but his was the first major work on chemical medicine since the return of the Stuarts. It was a large work, it stressed the need to concentrate on curing the sick rather than keeping the healthy well via academic dietetics, and it was penned by a master of persuasion, who frequently quoted at length respected authorities on the new philosophy, particularly Sir Francis Bacon and Robert Boyle.

Because Nedham's position seemed so threatening, within three months, a member of the College of Physicians brought out a reply to him. Robert Sprackling saw clearly that the “Fantastick Pleader” and “Innovatour” Nedham was trying to oppose both academic physic and the “legally established Corporation of Physicians.”²¹ Sprackling therefore defended Hippocrates' and Galen's writings from the misunderstandings and abuses of Nedham; he corrected the record regarding the true sentiments of modern authors such as Robert Boyle and Thomas Willis as well as of practicing physicians; he defended dietetics, “wherein Chymistry is not much concerned,” as being just as necessary as pharmacy “to the Hygieinal and Therapeutique parts of Physique”;²² he defended the modern notions of humors, elements, and temperaments;²³ and he was concerned to demonstrate to

²⁰ For lengthier descriptions of Nedham's treatise, see Richard F. Jones, *Ancients and Moderns: A Study of the Rise of the Scientific Movement in Seventeenth-Century England*, 2nd ed. (St. Louis, Missouri: Washington University Press, 1961), pp. 206–10; and Lester S. King, *The Road to Medical Enlightenment, 1650–1695* (New York: American Elsevier, 1970), pp. 145–54.

²¹ Robert Sprackling, *Medela Ignorantiae: Or, A Just and Plain Vindication of Hippocrates and Galen from the Groundless Imputations of M.N.* (1665), sig. A3. The book bears a license dated “Feb. 24, 1664/5.”

²² *Ibid.*, p. 32.

²³ *Ibid.*, esp. pp. 44–47.

the apothecaries that their economic interests lay with the physicians who sent prescriptions to them rather than with the “empirics” who would have the physicians make up their own medicines.²⁴

Toward the end of his book, Sprackling began calling Nedham a “fanatick writer.”²⁵ Nedham’s argument that the London College of Physicians should be overthrown because of the abuses of the Paris Faculty of Medicine in suppressing alternative medical practices in the early seventeenth century was for Sprackling “a pretty Fanatick inference, which will serve as properly to overthrow any other Authority, that can be established in the world.”²⁶ Nedham was, thus, guilty of “treason and conspiracy.”²⁷ Similar arguments were soon made by other collegiate physicians.²⁸

Sprackling’s abusive language toward Nedham grew worse as the book progressed because as time went on the chemists were not merely waging a war of words—they were trying to obtain institutional legitimacy, as well. Not four months after Nedham’s book, and just a few days after Sprackling’s book appeared, a pamphlet of one hundred pages written by Thomas O’Dowde announced in its dedication to Gilbert Sheldon, Archbishop of Canterbury, the formation of the Society of Chemical Physicians. O’Dowde’s little book for the most part advertised cures he had performed, but its preface strongly condemned the “Galenists,” and its conclusion contained two petitions: the first, for incorporation, addressed to the king by the thirty-five men who made up the potential membership of the Society, and the second, in support of the chemists, signed by thirty-eight noblemen and gentlemen.²⁹ O’Dowde’s petitions were published within a year after the House of Commons vetoed the College of Physicians’ new charter, at the same time T.M. was arguing that the College of Physicians was not enough like the Royal Society.

O’Dowde’s petitions were particularly troubling because they originated with a man who seemed to have influence in the realm. O’Dowde was a courtier, having recently been made a groom of the bedchamber of the king. This position would enable him to lobby for the scheme to create a Society of Chemical Physicians. By the time his pamphlet appeared, O’Dowde seemed to be gaining ground, for, according to its dedication, the pamphlet and its two petitions were published by O’Dowde “in obedience

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 24–30.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 158–59.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

²⁸ John Twysden, *Medicina Veterum Vindicata; Or An Answer To a Book, entituled Medela Medicinæ* (London, 1666); Nathaniel Hodges, *Vindiciae Medicinæ et Medicorum: Or an Apology for the Profession and Professors of Physick* (London, 1666).

²⁹ Thomas O’Dowde, *The Poor Man’s Physician, Or the True Art of Medicine, As it is Chymically prepared and administred, for healing the several Diseases incident to Mankind. The Third Edition.* (London, 1665), sigs. A3v–A6v, and pp. 92ff. The pamphlet, dated 10 March 1665, is called the “third edition” because it is an elaboration on two earlier advertisements by O’Dowde, one of which survives in the form of the broadside described below.

to your Lordship[']s [i.e., Archbishop Sheldon's], and their Lordships the Earl of Clarendon, Lord High Chancellor of England, and his Grace the Duke of Buckingham's Commands."³⁰

O'Dowde undoubtedly gained the position of groom and obtained a hearing from some of the most important lords at Court because he had been a royalist during the interregnum. The only account of his life relates that he had been born into a "generous" family in Ireland, but that his father's death and mother's remarriage, together with the "Troubles" in that country in the 1640s, caused him to lose his inheritance. He therefore entered the service of Charles I not long before the king's execution, and thereafter became an agent for the royalist cause, moving from place to place, being imprisoned several times (sometimes with his wife), and even (it was claimed) being examined by Cromwell himself on threat of death. Banished from England, he secretly returned to Nottingham and was taken prisoner again shortly before Cromwell's death, but he escaped again to join the king, returning to England upon the Restoration. During this time he also took up the practice of medicine full time to support himself and his family and to do good—all this according to his daughter's later testimony.³¹ Whatever one may think of her apology, the gist of her story is probably true: O'Dowde served as a sometime royal agent during the interregnum and supported himself in part by practicing medicine without any training—a way of generating income common enough to form a theme in picaresque literature.³²

Charles II, then, offered patronage to a loyal servant, O'Dowde, by granting him a place in his bedchamber. Equally important to O'Dowde's influence as his past, however, was the fact that the king held medical opinions that favored anyone who seemed to be able to cure, regardless of his credentials. Charles II went so far as to issue royal licenses to a number of empirics during the mid-1660s.³³ Therefore, as one of O'Dowde's associates later said, His Majesty "was pleased to give [O'Dowde] a kinde aspect, from a consideration of some notable Cures (as was reported) attained by him, which those eminent Galenists [of the College] could not accomplish."³⁴ That is, as he did to William Sermon, Sir Richard Barker, and other medical empirics offering novel medicines that had cured someone close to the king, the king was prepared to entertain the idea of extending his favors to O'Dowde.³⁵

³⁰ *Ibid.*, sig. A1.

³¹ Mary Trye, *Medicatrix; or the Woman-Physician: Vindicating Thomas O'Dowde, a Chymical Physician, and Royal Licentiate . . . against . . . Henry Stubbe* (London, 1675), pp. 25–32.

³² H. J. C. von Grimmelshausen, *The Adventurous Simplicissimus* (c. 1668), trans. A. T. S. Goodrick (reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962), pp. 232–34, 242–43, 251–54; also see Herbert Silvette, *The Doctor on Stage: Medicine and Medical Men in Seventeenth Century England* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1967).

³³ Leslie G. Matthews, "Licensed mountebanks in Britain," *J. Hist. Med.*, 1964, 19: 30–45.

³⁴ George Thomson, *A Letter sent to Mr. Henry Stubbe* (London, 1672), p. 21.

³⁵ For a description of how patronage could advance a practitioner, see Harold J. Cook, *The Decline of the Old Medical Regime in Stuart London* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1986), pp. 47–48.