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Early Modern Medical Consumerism and the ‘Secret’ Lapidary of Nicholas Culpeper

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The implementation of print technology dramatically transformed the medical landscape of early modern Europe. New methods of constructing and circulation of knowledge emerged which offered consumers an inexpensive solution to their medical woes: a printed manual of popular healing. Available at their local bookstall, these easy-to-read advice manuals appeared in various forms, from dispensatories to handbooks on midwifery, and offered their audiences direct access to practical medical knowledge. One such text, *Culpeper’s School of Physick* (1659), consists of several separate medical treatises on various topics attributed to the popularly esteemed English herbalist, physician and astrologer Nicholas Culpeper. By conducting a close textual analysis of the form and contents of a lapidary treatise contained within *School of Physick*, this paper investigates an intellectual and cultural shift in the medical marketplace of seventeenth-century London that displaced established ancient and medieval medical authorities in favor of famous contemporary practitioners.

Lapidaries evidence the theory and practice of one branch of pre-modern pharmacology by cataloguing the natural healing virtues of ‘stones.’ More than any other type of medieval literature, lapidaries were directly based on classical sources, such as Dioscorides and Pliny the Elder. Therefore, their contents remained relatively unaltered from late antiquity to the end of the sixteenth century. Breaking with this tradition, Culpeper appeals to the tastes of the mass market by legitimizing his content through the work of contemporary medical authorities, such as Jacques Houllier and Gerolamo Cardano, and framing it within the forbidden literature of ‘secrets.’ Using methodologies connected to the history of the book and the history of ideas, this paper draws upon classical, medieval and early modern sources to evidence the forces which shaped and sold popular manuals of medical advice. An analysis of ailments and cures also reveals the most common physical and psychological problems occupying Culpeper’s audience.

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