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# "It Is No Miracle": A Methodological Discussion Of Medieval Natural Medicine And Early Modern European Corpse Medicine

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“IT IS NO MIRACLE”: A METHODOLOGICAL DISCUSSION OF MEDIEVAL NATURAL  
MEDICINE AND EARLY MODERN EUROPEAN CORPSE MEDICINE

An Honors College Project Thesis

Presented to

The Department of History and Global Studies

&The Department of Bible, Missions, and Ministry

Abilene Christian University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for

Honors Scholar

by

Adam Lubbers

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has been accepted by the Honors College of Abilene Christian University  
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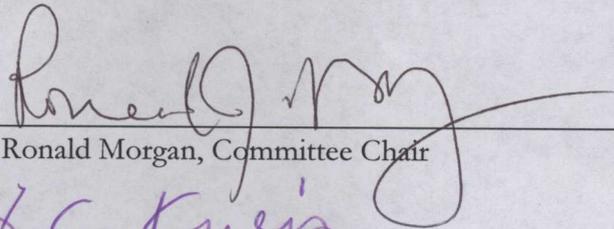
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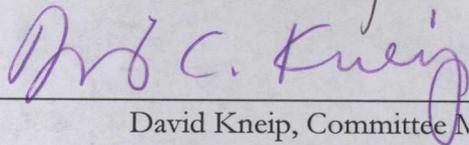
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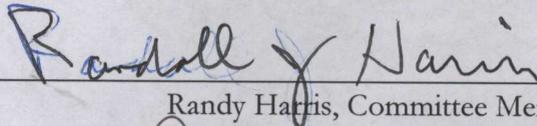
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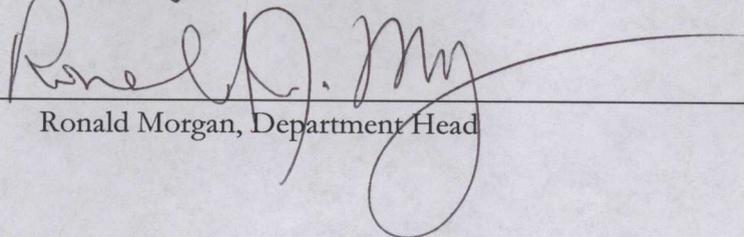
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## ABSTRACT

This paper will challenge the current historic methodology used by historians when examining Early Modern European corpse medicine. The history has been interpreted with a structuralist methodology within a framework of cannibalism, which has created anachronism. This paper will argue that Early Modern European corpse medicine needs to be viewed within the framework of natural medicine that began with medieval alchemy and astrology. The very brief history of alchemy and astrology will be explored in this paper, which will be compared with the pharmacopeias of Early Modern Europe and the philosophical tracts of prominent medicinal cannibal physicians Paracelsus and Jean Baptiste van Helmont. The paper will show how corpse medicine of Paracelsus, van Helmont, and others, was the logical fulfillment of the natural tradition of alchemy and astrology created in the Medieval Era.

In 1650, a text appeared in English fresh from translation. It was written by a pious, empirical Flemish man who would fight the plague, other physicians, and his own Catholic Church fiercely within his life for the sake of medicine. In this English text, these words were written: “The moss therefore of a skull, since hath received its seminality from the celestial orbs, but its matrix, conception, and increment from the mumial and medullary substance of the skull of man; it is no miracle, that it hath obtained excellent Astral, and Magnetical virtues, far transcending the common lot of Vegetables.”<sup>1</sup> This one quote speaks huge volumes about the man—Jean Baptiste van Helmont—and the medical tradition in which he participated. This text includes Paracelsian iconoclasm, medicinal cannibalism, astrology, alchemy, and natural philosophy. In recent years, the methodology of scholars emphasized the cannibalism of this text and have consequently ignored other important ideas included in van Helmont’s context. This paper will challenge the current historical methodology for early modern medicinal cannibalism and will argue instead for Paracelsians and medicinal cannibal physicians, such as van Helmont, to be viewed as a natural continuation of the astrology and alchemy of the Early Modern Era. First, it is necessary to explore what scholars have recently been saying.

### **CURRENT METHODOLOGY**

In the past thirty years, scholars have started exploring the phenomenon of Early Modern European medicinal cannibalism. Richard Sugg’s monograph, *Mummies, Cannibals, and Vampires: The History of Corpse Medicine from the Renaissance to the Victorians*, particularly portrays a succinct narrative of the people practicing medicinal cannibalism, characteristics of medicinal cannibalism, and the widespread diffusion of this practice in Western Europe. Other scholars who have done some work on this topic are Karen Gordon-Grube, Louise Christine

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Baptiste Van Helmont, *A Ternary of Paradoxes: The Magnetick Cure of Wounds, Nativity of Tartar in Wine, Image of God in Man*, trans. Walter Charleton (London: Printed by James Flesher for William Lee, 1650), 25.

Noble, and Kenneth Himmelman.<sup>2</sup> All four of these scholars are literary critical experts or comparative literature experts, which is noticeably reflected in their work. Gordon-Grube analyzes medicinal cannibalism within Edward Taylor's work, Noble analyzes the corpse medicine of Shakespeare, Sugg pays extensive and careful attention to John Donne,<sup>3</sup> and Himmelman portrays cannibalism primarily in binary, symbolic, and signifying terms. Along with this, their primary methodology in medicinal cannibalism would be considered structuralist, which is evidenced, in various intensities, within all of their work.

Himmelman's methods certainly fall under literary theory, although they are also profoundly anthropological. Noble follows this anthropological method very closely, Gordon-Grube reasonably, and Sugg slightly. All four, to different extents, are interested in placing the medicinal cannibalism of Early Modern Europe within the larger metanarrative of human cannibalistic activity in general. The logical fulfillment of this methodology is seen within Noble's thesis, which argues the Eucharist, revenge cannibalism, and medicinal cannibalism are equal to one another in terms of psychological fulfillment, desires, and motivations. To her, at least anthropologically, cannibalism is centered on the desire for power and sensuality.<sup>4</sup> In all forms of cannibalism, the accumulation of health, energy, or status is acquired in the process of

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<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Himmelman, "The Medicinal Body: An Analysis of Medicinal Cannibalism in Europe, 1300-1700" *Anthropology* 22 (1997): 183-205. Karen Gordon-Grube, "Anthropophagy in Post-Renaissance Europe: The Tradition of Medicinal Cannibalism" *American Anthropologist* 90, no. 2 (1988): 405-09. Karen Gordon-Grube, "Evidence of Medicinal Cannibalism in Puritan New England: "Mummy" and Related Remedies in Edward Taylor's "Dispensatory"" *Early American Literature* 28, no. 3 (January 01, 1993): 185-221. Louise Christine Noble, *Medicinal Cannibalism in Early Modern English Literature and Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> The references in his book, Richard Sugg, *Mummies, Cannibals and Vampires the History of Corpse Medicine from the Renaissance to the Victorians* (London: Routledge, 2011) to John Donne are numerous, with citations to Donne on pgs. 28-29, 33-36, 48, 75, 97, 141, 160, 169, 172-173, 176, 178, 182, and 200. For even more, see Richard Sugg, *John Donne* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> This is affirmed also by Himmelman, 187.

performing a cannibalistic act or ritual.<sup>5</sup> This means the Medieval Catholic transubstantiated Eucharist, theologically centered on consuming the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ, would be a form of cannibalism according to Noble. Gordon-Grube would say something similar:

“Mummy<sup>6</sup> may have gained popularity as a Protestant reaction against the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation. But at the very least one can say that the Paracelsian attitude toward the body of man...of Christ—and toward the Eucharist itself—are in keeping with the Puritan iconoclast attitude and with the Puritan "spiritual" interpretation of the Sacrament.”<sup>7</sup>

Explicitly stated by Noble, and at the very least considered by Gordon-Grube, the lost sensuality of the Eucharist became a *verdrängung*<sup>8</sup> for Protestants that inevitably manifested in medicinal cannibalism as a coping mechanism.

Himmelman also examines early modern cannibalism from an anthropological and metaphorical perspective that appears structuralist in formal methodology. He compares the ritual cannibalism of the Aztecs with the Medieval Catholic Eucharist and medicinal cannibalism. Himmelman uses several binary modules in his analysis—surgeon and doctor, witch and saint, the human body as pollutant and the human body as medicine, magic and religion, “positive and negative, between good and evil, between the body and the soul.”<sup>9</sup> With these binary lists, he questions common assumptions of cannibalism and challenges

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<sup>5</sup> Noble, 89-95.

<sup>6</sup> This will be discussed later, but the flesh used in medicinal cannibalism was often from Egyptian mummies and bodies found within the Arab desert. However, it was also commonly forged, and the flesh and blood of criminals would be a little more common.

<sup>7</sup> Karen Gordon-Grube, "Evidence of Medicinal Cannibalism in Puritan New England: "Mummy" and Related Remedies in Edward Taylor's "Dispensatory, 204.

<sup>8</sup> Or, a very strong inner desire.

<sup>9</sup> Himmelman, 200.

preconceived notions of cannibalism by analyzing the synthesis, conflict, and ambiguity of conflicting ideas. Sugg himself briefly summarizes the ideas of Himmelman, Gordon-Grube, and Noble, addresses that medicinal cannibalism was possibly a way for Protestants to receive some fulfillment after they abandoned the sensual Catholic Eucharist and the consumption of the literal flesh and blood of God. However, he moves on and pushes the topic no further.<sup>10</sup>

This structuralist, literary critical, and anthropological interpretation of medicinal cannibalism has some benefits. To name a few, it creates a greater understanding of cannibalism by showing the similarity between different types of cannibalism. The human desires that motivate cannibalistic tendencies are explored, and common views of the human body and human spirituality are examined historically. However, this methodology poses some major interpretive problems. Noble herself seems to take the methodology to its logical conclusion by claiming that medicinal cannibalism began because European Protestants lacked intimacy.<sup>11</sup> This portrays the phenomenon as an irrational inkling that suddenly developed within people. Just like a modern human who eats food when they are stressed, European societies, who were not eating other people, suddenly started eating people after a traumatic church split. Although the field of

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<sup>10</sup> Sugg, 198.

<sup>11</sup> Although this is not the space to discuss, the structuralist methodology does not appear effective at all when it is applied to the history of cannibalism. There are far too many differences between all of the different types of cannibalism; revenge, medicinal, funerary, ritual, sexual, and symbolical, to name a few. For a case study, Noble's thesis claims that revenge cannibalism, medicinal cannibalism, and the Eucharist are all philosophically similar. However, there are simply too many philosophical differences between the three. The Eucharist was never explicitly taken for health purposes and it is distinct from revenge cannibalism and medicinal cannibalism for these reasons: 1) The Eucharist is not inheritably self-centered, it is always taken in community, and its consumption adds to the glory of God, an outside being who is able to give and receive the power of the act at will. Medicinal cannibalism and revenge cannibalism is taken at the expense of another person, the power is found within the substance itself, rather than apart from it, as in the Eucharist, and the consumption fulfills a specific need. It satisfies a person's anger or health, rather than a divine need for love and transformation (Avramescu, 2009; Bynum, 1987). 2) Protestants never completely gave up the Eucharist and Catholics participated in medicinal cannibalism too (Camporesi, 1998). 3) The Eucharist and medicinal cannibalism do not target individuals. As in modern medical blood transfusions, the flesh and blood of a person outside of the human body becomes a material or liquid, rather than a particular human. Revenge cannibalism, however, targets a specific group or individual and desires the person's death and consumption as a final act of humiliation.

psychology has certainly shown that humans have irrational tendencies, history seeks to tell a rational narrative of causality. Medicinal cannibalism became common for many people within a society, but it was not a Freudian desire. This attribution would be anachronistic. It was a rational method of medicine for many people, because other medicines were often so brutal that any alternative that could work would make sense to them.<sup>12</sup>

Therefore, to create a rational narrative the most effective approach involves an examination of the philosophy of the physicians practicing medicinal cannibalism and their recipes, while comparing their works with themes that can be traced into the Medieval Era or earlier. In an era where people had a sacrament that was symbolically cannibalistic and a cult of Saints where dead bodies would heal sick pilgrims, establishing an effective context is difficult. However, it was not in medieval religious activities where corpse medicine would take hold, although they may have influenced it, but in medieval science. More research with this methodology will be required to completely prove the methodology's efficacy, but it appears true that Paracelsianism, and therefore medicinal cannibalism, are direct descendants of the traditions of alchemy, astrology, and natural magic that became prevalent in the Later Medieval Era.

### **THE SEMINALITY OF CELESTIAL ORBS: MEDIEVAL ASTROLOGY**

In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, an academic tradition was beginning to rise. Arabic texts were slowly being diffused into the intellectually and culturally backwards societies of Western Europe. The rise of universities enabled academics to read classical Greek authors such as Ptolemy and Arabic authors such as Abu Ma'shar, who were praised well into the 13<sup>th</sup> and

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<sup>12</sup> Scholars have been saying this for awhile. In lieu of medieval and early modern medicine people turned to magic (see Richard Kieckhefer *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) and Richard Kieckhefer, "The Specific Rationality of Medieval Magic," *The American Historical Review* 99, no. 3 (1994): 836, the cult of the Saints (Bartlett, Robert Barlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things? Saints and Worshippers from the Martyrs to the Reformation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 617, and to Paracelsianism itself (Andrew Wear, "Medicine in Early Modern Europe," in *The Western Medical Tradition 800 BC to AD 1800*, ed. Lawrence I. Conrad (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995), 224.

14<sup>th</sup> centuries as long as their ideas aligned with the great philosopher, Aristotle.<sup>13</sup> With the widespread diffusion of these texts, "the general acceptance of 'natural' astrology—the use of planetary influences in medicine, alchemy and meteorology—is not surprising, given the universal belief in Aristotle's physics. It would have been unscientific to have rejected such astrologia."<sup>14</sup> So with the discovery of old Arabic and Greek ideas, along with an Aristotelian worldview, the planets, the sun, and the moon became orbs of power which emanated waves onto the Earth that naturally influenced everything. This belief in the celestial power only became more common into the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.<sup>15</sup>

Astrology was an extremely complex system reserved for the bookish academics of the era. It was a supplement to astronomy, which was interested in the movements, distances, mathematics, and the overall natural functions of the planets. In the Medieval Era, this would include the kind of power the planets radiated, where they effected, and how they did it. Astrology, then, would be interested in the consequences of the celestial power against humans and nature.<sup>16</sup> In the Thirteenth century, astrologers began to strongly believe that knowledge of these powers could be useful in alchemy and medicine. Astrologers, physicians, and philosophers including Thomas Aquinas,<sup>17</sup> Albertus Magnus, and Roger Bacon defended this new science.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> J.D. North, "Medieval Concepts of Celestial Influence: A Survey," in *Astrology Science and Society: Historical Essays*, ed. Patrick Curry (Suffolk ; Wolfeboro: Boydell Press, 1987), 8.

<sup>14</sup> Jim S. Tester, *The History of Western Astrology* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell, 1987), 183.

<sup>15</sup> *Aggregationes de crisi et creticis diebus*, c. 2, ed. Cornelius O'Boyle, *Medieval Prognosis and Astrology* (Cambridge: Wellcome Unit for the History of Medicine, 1991), pp. 64-72, trans. Faith Wallis, quoted in Faith Wallis, *Medieval Medicine: A Reader* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010) 318-320.

<sup>16</sup> Graziella Federici Vescovini, "Peter of Abano and Astrology," ed. Patrick Curry and trans. Angus Clarke in *Astrology Science and Society: Historical Essays* (Suffolk ; Wolfeboro: Boydell Press, 1987), 26.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* Ia, q. 115, a. 4 and *Contra Gentiles* III.84.

Many physicians in the twelfth century began to make prescriptions, perform bloodletting, and create talismans with astrological signs based on the advice of astrologers. A small almanac from the fifteenth century included warnings to surgeons and physicians against certain incisions during certain astrological periods. As an example, it would recommend that a surgeon never make an incision on the foot during Pisces.<sup>19</sup> This form of astrology was considered natural magic, or “natural forces of bodies” that could be used efficaciously for improved health. For this reason, astrology was able to develop credibility and gain a foothold without severe persecution from the Church or from kings at the time. If a physician or an astrologer used the natural movements of the planets to predict the weather or improve healing, that would be natural. If the astrologer was believed to be invoking demons or was accused of divination, they could be considered sorcerers. Sorcerers and witches would be tried, imprisoned, have property seized, or lost life if they were declared guilty and never recanted or repented.<sup>20</sup>

These views would be nicely expressed by Thomas Aquinas. According to Aquinas, it was not unlawful to use natural forces to enhance healing by using them to their proper effects. However, he condemned talismans, protective amulets inscribed with astrological symbols, because they were unnatural and mean nothing. Since amulets are unnatural, they could only be effective with the aid of demons.<sup>21</sup> For concurrent in time, church authorities became very concerned with potentially educated magicians either using demons to learn secrets or using charisma to trick unknowing people they needed protection from demons. Protection the

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<sup>18</sup> Tester, 181-182.

<sup>19</sup> Illustration from London, Wellcome Library MS 40 (folding almanac, late fifteenth c.), surrounding text trans. Faith Wallis, quoted in Wallis, *Medieval Medicine*, 287-288.

<sup>20</sup> Hilary M. Carey, “Astrology at the English Court in the Later Middle Ages,” ed. Patrick Curry in *Astrology Science and Society: Historical Essays* (Suffolk ; Wolfeboro: Boydell Press, 1987), 50/

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 2.2.96.1-4, trans. T.F. O'Meara and M.J. Duffy, quoted in Bernd-Christian Otto and Michael Stausberg, *Defining Magic: A Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 49-50.

magician could offer, for a small sum from the petrified patron.<sup>22</sup> Along with some clerical officials, many astrologers faced pressure around the fifteenth century for, frankly, making people uncomfortable with the power they claimed to have. As Hilary Carey has shown, astrologers at royal courts who predicted the deaths of others found no favor with anyone. These predictions were frequent, caused panic, and made astrologers suspicious of foul play.<sup>23</sup> Despite the scandals and the panic, these omniscient men would inspire future generations to continue unlocking magical secrets. Astrology would defiantly last well into the Early Modern Era, because it would have enough philosophical credibility from credible places to show astrology as mostly a natural science. Although some may use it maliciously, astrologists could avoid accusations of demonology and magic fairly easily.

### **TRANSCENDING THE COMMON LOT: MEDIEVAL ALCHEMY**

In *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer interrupts the pilgrimage of his characters, his entire story, with a sudden visit from a Canon Yeoman. The Yeoman speaks nothing besides insults and mockery against the art of alchemy. Chaucer reveals, through this character, that he is clearly familiar with alchemy, and he acknowledges many particular characteristics of medieval alchemy. He names the four quintessential elements—water, earth, air, and fire, and the attributive planets for every mineral: “God for the sun and silver for the moon,/ Iron for Mars and quicksilver in tune/ with Mercury, lead which prefigures Saturn/ And tin for Jupiter. Copper takes the pattern/ of Venus if you please!,” and the central metals of mercury and sulfur.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Michael D Bailey, "From Sorcery to Witchcraft: Clerical Conceptions of Magic in the Later Middle Ages," *Speculum* 76, no. 4 (October 01, 2001): 964, accessed January 13, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/2903617?ref=search-gateway:f6c7276978ac6b7b72d5c1c6bfe42425>.

<sup>23</sup> Carey, “Astrology at the English Court,” 52.

<sup>24</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, “The Canon Yeoman’s Tale,” *The Canterbury Tales*, trans Nevill Coghill 5th ed. (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), 451-473.

Chaucer describes the real, medieval phenomenon of alchemy, although he thinks it is clearly a sham. To Chaucer, alchemy is an expensive, densely complex, and useless practice that his contemporaries waste their time practicing. So who were the contemporaries wasting their time on this art?

An alchemist named Bisticus in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, when curing a fever, encouraged the physician to collect three leaves of salvia while repeating a paternoster, Ave Maria, the Apostle's Creed, and the Salve Regina. Once the leaves were collected, one would write "The Father is peace" on one, "The Son is the life" on the second, and "The Holy Spirit is the cure and health" on the third. Once the leaves were eaten, the fever would subside. A second recipe involved a mixture of several herbs, including "frankincense... aloes, lemon... mastix, gariofle, galange, cinnamon, nux, must, cubebs... apretitreos... and distilled alcohol" which shall be mixed and distilled to create a very powerful concoction.<sup>25</sup> Herbs, alchemy, prayers, and incantations were all commonly used together, in both examples, to harness healing qualities in nature and supplicate the divine power of God existing in nature.<sup>26</sup> The former recipe is an example of a medicine that is not alchemical, while the latter is a good example of a recipe that is alchemical. Recipes, such as this, which invoked God or natural herbs may have their efficacy questioned, although they were not condemned as magic. This would have caused some, such as Chaucer, to scoff. However, if people did believe these things worked, they would have considered it to be

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<sup>25</sup> Bisticus, a manuscript of alchemical and medical treatises, 1487, quoted in Lynn Thorndike, *Science and Thought in the Fifteenth Century: Studies in the History of Medicine and Surgery, Natural and Mathematical Science, Philosophy and Politics* (New York: Hafner, 1967), 266-267.

<sup>26</sup> Bailey, *Magic and Superstition in Europe*, 84.

medicine from God. Either God miraculously healed, or God attributed power to an element with the ability to heal. Both of these sources were completely legal sources of medicine.<sup>27</sup>

To the alchemist, natural power was harnessed through refining minerals and metals with the use of the elements, and the power, natural and spiritual, that God established on the Earth. Astrology was essential to the process, because certain celestial powers would influence certain metals, as Chaucer described.<sup>28</sup> The primary goal of alchemists was often the Philosopher's Stone, or Elixir, which was capable of doing nearly everything one could imagine. In a treatise written to Edward IV in 1471, Lord George Ripley described the twelve gates of alchemy that, once passed by the alchemist, would lead to the creation of the Philosopher's Stone. Although most of the alchemical theory is arcane and incomprehensible, there are points to notice from the text. It makes frequent use of the astrological forces, the four elements (water, earth, air, and fire) are critical in every recipe, and mercury and sulphur are frequently referenced.<sup>29</sup>

These twelve gates to create the Stone involve a stringent series of washing, burning, and purifying metals to create the Elixir. It is so aggressive that Ripley compares the Stone's ordeal to the redemption humans will experience in Purgatory before they move to Paradise.<sup>30</sup> This is characteristic of alchemy: elements, minerals, and metals processed in an intense cleaning so that

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<sup>27</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 2.2.96.1-4, trans. T.F. O'Meara and M.J. Duffy, quoted in Otto and Stausberg, 51.

<sup>28</sup> Bailey, *Magic and Superstition in Europe*, 95.

<sup>29</sup> George Ridley, "The Compound of Alchymie" in *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum Containing Severall Poeticall Pieces of Our Famous English Philosophers, Who Have Written the Hermetique Mysteries in Their Owne Ancient Language. Faithfully Colected into One Volume, with Annotations* (London: Printed by Grismond for Nath Broke, at the Angel in Cornhill, 1652), accessed March 17, 2017, <https://archive.org/details/theatrumchemicum00ashm>.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

the true virtue of the substance, which already existed in nature unrefined, could be utilized.<sup>31</sup>

This was the process of medieval alchemists such as Albertus Magnus, Roger Bacon, Reymond of Marseilles, and Arnold of Villanova, who are all frequently quoted by Ripley, Thomas Norton of Bristoll, and Chaucer.<sup>32</sup> It is apparent that the alchemists and physicians of the Early Modern Era were continuing a tradition established by medieval sources.

Scholars have known for some time now that alchemy has existed in the Early Modern Era. The historical tradition has largely shifted from proving that these types of medicines existed to examining alchemical processes themselves.<sup>33</sup> In this paper, the alchemical process within Early Modern medicinal cannibalism is the topic being surveyed. Since we have constructed a context for medieval astrology and alchemy, let us now survey the philosophy and practice of medicinal cannibalism within the context of medieval alchemy and astrology.

## **THE HUMAN BODY AS PHARMACEUTICAL INGREDIENT: A NEW METHODOLOGY**

Philippus Aureolus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim Paracelsus (1493-1541) was a Swiss physician who changed the formation and direction of medicine forever. He created a medicine different from any university or any book. This medicine originated from the testimonies of commoners, soothsayers, wise women, and general apothecaries. Paracelsus

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<sup>31</sup> William R. Newman, "Mercury and Sulphur among the High Medieval Alchemists: From Raza and Avicenna to Albertus Magnus and Pseudo-Roger Bacon," *Ambix* 61, no. 4 (November 2014): 321, accessed March 17, 2017, doi:10.1179/1745823414y.0000000004.

<sup>32</sup> Chaucer, 473. Ripley, 111. Thomas Norton of Bristoll, "The Ordinall of Alchimy," in *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum Containing Severall Poeticall Pieces of Our Famous English Philosophers, Who Have Written the Hermetique Mysteries in Their Owne Ancient Language. Faithfully Colected into One Volume, with Annotations*, ed. Elias Ashmole (London: Printed by Grismond for Nath Broke, at the Angel in Cornhill, 1652), 53-54, accessed March 17, 2017, <https://archive.org/details/theatrumchemicum00ashm>

<sup>33</sup> Lawrence Principe, *Chymists and Chymistry: Studies in the History of Alchemy and Early Modern Chemistry* (Sagamore Beach, MA: Science History Publications/USA, a Division of Watson Publishing International, 2007), ix.

argued for a medicine that could be seen with the eyes.<sup>34</sup> It is reasonable to say that Paracelsus championed the natural medicine that would create the inexorable movement to modern medical institutions. Paracelsus would likely agree with this claim, as he frequently boasted that he had surpassed Aristotle, Albertus Magnus, Thomas Aquinas, Galen, Hippocrates, and other great philosophers, theologians, and physicians.<sup>35</sup> Paracelsus believed that physicians should only examine the nature and philosophy of God, rather than the words of these men.<sup>36</sup>

Along with his empiricism, Paracelsus was a deeply Christian physician who wrote a huge corpus of theology commensurate with his medical philosophy and theoretical texts. Often described by his disciples and his contemporaries as “the Luther of medicine,” due to his intense rejection of authority figures and his innovative iconoclasm. He ideally symbolized this when he burned Averroes’ textbook, the standard medical textbook of his day, in front of a crowd. Despite this, Paracelsus rejected this comparison to Luther in both his words and in the effects of his movement. Unlike the fragmentary nature of the Protestant Reformation, Paracelsus radically and heterodoxically challenged all aspects of society to create a medical tradition which Catholics and Protestants, natural philosophers and Galenists, could eventually rally behind.<sup>37</sup>

Despite all that has been said, it would be reductionist to say that Paracelsus was revolutionary. It is true that his movement and his enigmatic character fit many criteria of what it means for a practice to be considered ‘revolutionary.’ To name one example, his writings and teachings made drastic strides toward the scientific method, empiricism, chemistry, and chemical

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<sup>34</sup> Roy Porter, *The Greatest Benefit to Mankind: A Medical History of Humanity* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003), 201-203.

<sup>35</sup> Dane T. Daniel, “Coping with Heresy: Suchten, Toxites, and the Early Reception of Paracelsus’s Theology,” in Lawrence Principe, *Chymists and Chymistry*, 54.

<sup>36</sup> Charles Webster, *Paracelsus: Medicine, Magic and Mission at the End of Time* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 109. Porter, 202.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-2.

experimentation that sought to disembark from the medicine of ancient authorities such as Galen and Hippocrates. At the same time, however, Paracelsus' medicine was highly rooted in spirituality and magic, as even he would call it.<sup>38</sup> As Charles Webster has noted in his recent biography of Paracelsus,

"By emphasizing the consistency of his magic with the evangelical faith, by conspicuously distancing himself from popular practitioners who were commonly suspected of engaging in sorcery and by rejecting the heathen sources venerated by the Neoplatonists, Paracelsus hoped to endow his own magic with superior credentials and establish the magical arts as a legitimate basis for the betterment of the arts and sciences with which he was engaged."<sup>39</sup>

For any strange, unexpected, or miraculous cure, Paracelsus' reaction was to attribute it to some occult power, celestial influence, or quintessence. He was steeped in the medieval alchemical and astrological tradition, which had laid the philosophical principles of natural medicine and magic under a pretense of Christian philosophy and natural causality. This meant that a person such as Paracelsus could take this tradition, combine it with empirical experimentation, fervent Christian mystical theology, and other practical goals to create a new Paracelsian medicine that was alchemical, and subsequently astrological, as well as experimental. Paracelsus therefore establishes himself as a natural paradox. He led the revolution and the counter-revolution at the exact same moment. His movement would become something new and something familiar in Early Modern European society.

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<sup>38</sup> D. P Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic: From Ficino to Campanella* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 1978), 96.

<sup>39</sup> Webster, 157.

As Didier Kahn has shown in recent work, scholars often use the words Paracelsianism and alchemy interchangeably.<sup>40</sup> This should be apparent, after all, as Paracelsus believed all matter could be examined through mercury, sulphur, and salt; very common medieval alchemical terminology. Evidenced in a predecessor of Paracelsus, Sir George Ripley, who says in an alchemical treatise: "And be thou wyse in chesing of thy Water,/ Medyll with no Salt, Sulphure, nor mene Minerall,/ For whatsoever any Water to the do clatter;/ Our Sulphure and Mercury be only in Mettall."<sup>41</sup> Although there is no indication that Paracelsus read Ripley's work, Paracelsus is clearly familiar with the tradition of alchemy that established the use of Salt, Sulphure, Mercury, Mettall, and Minerall.<sup>42</sup> It would be this alchemical tradition that would ultimately lead to Paracelsian corpse medicine. Paracelsus would help raise a view that the human body, the *imago dei*, could be a useful mineral in a medical recipe. His philosophical didactic and his logic concerning corpse medicine can be successfully seen through his text, *Medicina Diastatica*.

Paracelsus' *Medicina Diastatica or Sympatheticall Mumie ; Containing, Many Mysterious and Hidden Secrets in Philosophy and Physic* addresses an idea he has about something called "mumie." To Paracelsus, mumie is not an embalmed body in an Egyptian sarcophagus (although that would be an ingredient in corpse medicine, as shown later), but a mystical, spiritual power that exists in everyone. He describes it as an alchemical ingredient for medical recipes which can get sick, be contagious, and be effectively utilized if it is mixed with air. Therefore, a human body thrown into water, buried, or burned, loses its mumie and the commensurate potential.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Didier Kahn, "King Henry IV, Alchemy, and Paracelsianism in France (1589-1610)," in Lawrence Principe, *Chymists and Chymistry*, 1.

<sup>41</sup> Ripley, 152.

<sup>42</sup> Webster, 136.

Paracelsus identified this mumie extracted with air as a major ingredient in the creation of the Philosopher's Stone, a common goal in alchemy. This "aire mumie" can either be acquired through various alchemical methods that included a series of contacts with earth, water, and fire, or through a mystical method of transplantation or quintessence.<sup>44</sup> With Paracelsian alchemy, astrology was a necessary aspect. Diseases were either caused by the "Celestiall Stars" or spread from the "infected man himselfe," or in other words, from astrological forces or the diseased mumie of another person.<sup>45</sup> In this text, there are more than a dozen references to celestial matters, the planets, or the rays of the universe that influence the Earth. The text also includes several recipes that shows ways the mumie can be used. One recipe used mumie in order to make two animals get along with each other. The recipe involved the sperm of both animals taken and mixed with Earth. The mixture would be divided in two, mixed with two different plants that would grow fruit, and when the plant had produced fruit, both of the animals would be fed the fruit infused with the sperm of the other animal. They will then love each other.<sup>46</sup> In this medical treatment, the mumie of both animals is transferred into each other to create a strong, amicable connection.

Although this text is mystical, arcane, and quite difficult for anyone to understand, the philosophical nuances of it are striking and worthy of discussion. By identifying a force that nobody can easily see, mumie, Paracelsus created a natural, non-humoural, and non-demonic reason for the causes of strange disease. Likewise, it created a type of magical medicine and

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<sup>43</sup> Paracelsus, *Medicina Diastatica or Sympatheticall Mumie ; Containing, Many Mysterious and Hidden Secrets in Philosophy and Physic* ed. by Andrea Tenzelius, trans. by Ferdinando Parkhurst (London: Printed by T. Newcomb for T.Heath, 1653), 15-19, accessed March 14, 2017, <https://archive.org/details/medicinadiastati00para>.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 39-44.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

philosophy that could be explained in completely rational methods. By using this text as a case sample, we can first see that Paracelsus distinguished himself from other sorcerers and becomes identified as a natural astrologer and alchemist, which medieval theologians and philosophers considered a legal and rational method of medicine. Secondly, Paracelsus says in the text that "If Physicians or any other body understood but the right use of this Mumie, or what it is good for, not any Malefactors would be left three daies on the Gallows, or continue on the Wheel from being stoln away."<sup>47</sup> With explicit confidence and without any inclination of prevarication, Paracelsus advocates that executed criminals can be valuable medicine. Within the context of this philosophical treatise, corpses were effective because of the natural mumie power within human bodies and the natural power emanated from the celestial orbs, which existed because God created them and gave them this natural power. Paracelsus established the human being as a completely natural, rational alchemical ingredient with natural powers that could be utilized in natural medicines for natural cures. Paracelsus, his disciples, and others with keen eyes for observational medicine would include "human" as simply another potentially effective medicine that could be found in an apothecary shop.

Jean Baptiste Van Helmont (1580-1644) was one of Paracelsus' most effective disciples.<sup>48</sup> Nearly his equal in Christian piety and mystical endeavor, and with an inclination toward some of Paracelsus' polemic power, Van Helmont would struggle bitterly during the religious conflict of the Thirty Years War, where he was accused of heresy and spent large amounts of time battling traditional medical authorities. Historically, he would further chemical experimentation and continue Paracelsus' tradition of Christian medicine while battling the

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>48</sup> Van Helmont, 1. Van Helmont himself identifies himself as a disciple of Paracelsus.

greater authorities of his day.<sup>49</sup> As seen in a sample of one of his most important texts, however, van Helmont also continued the Paracelsian tradition of attributing natural remedies for medicinal cannibalism and other pseudo-magical recipes.

Van Helmont's text, *A Ternary of Paradoxes: The Magnetick Cure of Wounds, Nativity of Tartar in Wine, Image of God in Man*, is no different from Paracelsus' *Medicina Diastatica* in terms of their alchemical and astrological tendencies. Van Helmont wrote this treatise as a rebuttal against Rudolph Goclenius, an Aristotelian contemporary physician, concerning the use of moss grown on a human cranium. In the process of refutation, van Helmont exhorted a formal natural philosophy. The quote at the beginning of this paper: "The moss therefore of a skull, since hath received its seminality from the celestial orbs, but its matrix, conception, and increment from the mumial and medullary substance of the skull of man; it is no miracle, that it hath obtained excellent Astral, and Magnetical virtues, far transcending the common lot of Vegetables,"<sup>50</sup> makes perfect sense within the context of Western astrology and alchemy. In this quote alone, van Helmont shows that moss grown on the skull of a human is effective because it receives power from natural astrological forces, mumie, an alchemical ingredient created by the brain, and another natural force known as "magnetical virtues," which will be discussed shortly. His clause, "it is no miracle," holds great significance in the passage because it clearly shows that van Helmont is doing predictable magic. The positive results of skull moss do not involve the aid of demons. Rather, the abilities and virtues of skull moss can be attributed to explainable powers absorbed by the skull moss.

Van Helmont defends his orthodoxy within the text by explicitly arguing that skull moss creates good results, has natural reasons for creating good results, and since both of these are

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<sup>49</sup> Porter, 207-209.

<sup>50</sup> Van Helmont, 25.

true, skull moss does not involve demons.<sup>51</sup> In order to make a claim for a mystical power nobody can see, van Helmont's main focus becomes magnetism. Magnetism, functioning very similarly to Paracelsus' mumie, is a spiritual power that exists within all people and between all people. As he vaguely claims, it is "indeed a virtue celestial, but yet in no degree of emulation, to be ascribed to sublunaries." Or in other words, it is a form of astrological power that effects everything. Because of magnetism, taking the warm blood of a sick patient, placing it in a white egg, and then feeding it to a dog, will cause the dog to become sick and the patient to be cured.<sup>52</sup>

The skull moss van Helmont finds effective is believed to be an assemblage of moss and lichen that form on a skull left out overnight.<sup>53</sup> To van Helmont, it is a powerful medicine, which is precisely why he is threatened by Goclenius. To Goclenius, skull moss is only able to work so effectively because demons are being aroused. As we have said earlier, van Helmont defends the natural efficacy of skull moss by spending the treatise listing the natural possibilities that cause skull moss to heal. First, astral forces emanate their power toward the Earth, which is captured by the moss growing on the skull. Second, the skull is an ideal bone to use for healing because it contains the brain, which possess medullary substances. As Van Helmont later says in astutely alchemical terms, it holds good "precious liquors."<sup>54</sup> Third, the skull has natural magnetic and mumial power visited upon it.

Paracelsian and Helmontian powers, astrological and alchemical powers, all unite to give a solid philosophical reasoning behind skull moss. Yet van Helmont continues with his natural philosophical application by applying his philosophy elsewhere:

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 3-8.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 12

<sup>53</sup> For a scientific explanation of skull moss, see Bill Schutt, *Cannibalism: A Perfectly Natural History* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2017), 213.

<sup>54</sup> Van Helmont, 30.

"The material world is on all sides governed, regulated, and coerced by the immaterial and invisible: and that all corporeal created natures are placed at the footstool of man, as being subordinate to the regality of his will. And this very thing truly is the cause, why even the mummy, the fat, the mucus, and the humane blood."<sup>55</sup>

This materialist argument placed van Helmont and Paracelsianism outside of any possibility of demonic magic and within the confines of natural magic and natural medicine. Even though van Helmont extended his medical logic to incorporate more parts of the human body, the medicine remained within an acceptable realm. Van Helmont here applied all principles to the human body and absolutely made it a natural and rational medicine. In pharmacopeias, "human" would start to appear as an ordinary medical and pharmaceutical ingredient alongside roots and unicorn horn.

In 1608, a Pharmacopeia, books with a list of items that should be kept in an apothecary's shop and how the apothecary would acquire them, appeared in London after it was diffused and translated from France. It was written by a French Galenist named Jean De Renou, and it included man's blood and the flesh of mummy. For the blood, it was necessary to take it "from some temperate and sound man, if it may be had; as the blood of such as are beheaded," and the mummy must not be disguised, rotten flesh that was apparently being sold by fraudulent mummy dealers.<sup>56</sup> Clearly, Renou saw these cannibalistic ingredients as commonplace in apothecary

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 71

<sup>56</sup> Jean De Renou *A Medicinal Dispensatory: Containing the Vwhole Body of Physick: Discovering the Natures, Properties, and Vertues of Vegetables, Minerals, & Animals: The Manner of Compounding Medicaments ... and the Way to Administer Them ; Methodically Digested in Five Books of Philosophical and Pharmaceutical Institutions ; Three Books of Physical Materials Galenical and Chymical ; Together with a Most Perfect and Absolute Pharmacopoea or Apothecaries Shop ; Accommodated with Three Useful Tables*, trans. Richard Tomlinson (London: Printed by Jo: Streater and Ja: Cottrel; and Are to Be Sold by George Sawbridge, at the Bible on Ludgate-hill., 1608), accessed March 24 2017, [http://dfg-viewer.de/show/?tx\\_dlf%5Bid%5D=http%3A%2F%2Fdigital.ub.uni-](http://dfg-viewer.de/show/?tx_dlf%5Bid%5D=http%3A%2F%2Fdigital.ub.uni-)

shops, and his writing is more focused on fraudulent corpse dealers and the quality of blood being collected than the philosophical efficacy of these ingredients.

In 1651, the English physician Daniel Border wrote a book of medical recipes for various ailments. One recipe included the “quintaessence of man’s blood,” which is made in the same style as gold and other minerals. To make it, one would

Take the bloud of a young sanguine man and chollerick man at the Barbers shops as thou mayest have it, and namely of such men as use good wines, then put away the water after it hath stood, and paste and bake it with ten parts of Common salt, prepared to the use and medicine of man, then put it in a glasse vessell, and put it in horse dung til it be rotted and putrified all the bloud into water, and that may be within ten days, sometimes more and sometimes lesse. Then put it in a limbeck and distill it by a good fire, and take thereof the water as much as thou may, and grind the dregs that it leaveth on a marble stone, and put all the water thereto and grind it again together, and then distill it, and so continue grinding and distilling as before many times untill thou have a noble water of bloud, of the which Quintaessence may be drawn thus.<sup>57</sup>

This has several key signifiers for an alchemical recipe. There is distillation, burning, and washing in a repetitive fashion that would be common for an alchemist creating the philosopher’s stone or replenishing a metal to its natural, powerful function. In this case, the alchemist does not use metal, but the blood of a human.

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duesseldorf.de%2Ffoai%2F%3Fverb%3DGetRecord%26metadataPrefix%3Dmets%26identifier%3D1259118&tx\_dlf%5Bpage%5D=7&tx\_dlf%5Bdouble%5D=0&cHash=62bc92e7ccd70c29144049dbd0a9a1dd, 440-441.

<sup>57</sup> Daniel Border, *Polypharmakos Kai Chymistes, Or, The English Unparell'd Physitian and Chyrurgian: Shewing the True Vse of All Manner of Plants and Minerals in Which Is Explained the Whole Art and Secresy of Physick and Chyrurgery* (London: Printed by B. Alsop and are to be sold at his house in Grubstreet, near the Upper Pump, 1651), accessed March 17, 2017. <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A28815.0001.001/1:7.191.1?rgn=div3;view=fulltext>, 124.

In 1654, the College of Physicians in London, with Nicholas Culpeper as leading physician, published their own pharmacopeia. It contains the natural function of all minerals, metals, and elements. Hidden plainly within the large tome are ingredients from human bodies and recipes that involve human ingredients. In the section of the pharmacopeia subtitled “Parts of the Living Creatures,” there are five human components included.<sup>58</sup> Nestled between unicorn horn and Cock’s Comb is “the skull of a man killed by a violent death.” Later in that section is the “milk of woman,” the “turds...of men, of women,” “the piss...of man or woman who is a maid,” and “the moss on a man’s skull.”<sup>59</sup> Within the section of liquors, a cure for epilepsy could be acquired from either a man's unburied skull, beaten into powder, mixed with betony water, and taken inwardly, or the consumption of a small triangular bone from the skull. For the latter remedy, Paracelsus was personally cited as the benefactor of the idea.<sup>60</sup> In the same section, the fat of a man is recommended “to anoint such limbs as fall away from the flesh.”<sup>61</sup> Finally, in the section on powders, out of the forty-four powders listed, two contain human ingredients. One is explicitly condemned by Culpeper, but the other is praised by him. The recipe he praised says: “Take of Terra fig llata, Sanguis Draconis, Dragons blood so called though it be nothing else but Gum of a Tree. Mummy of each two drams; sperma ceti [whale sperm] one dram; Rhurbarb half

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<sup>58</sup> A quick definition of cannibalism and corpse medicine might be necessary. It is very easy to get bogged down under technical definitions and exceptions to what might constitute cannibalism, so for this paper, I will simply make corpse medicine thus: Any medicine that uses elements made by the human body, including flesh, blood, bones, semen, milk, feces, urine, hair, and nails.

<sup>59</sup> Nicholas Culpeper, *Pharmacopoeia Londinensis; Or, The London Dispensatory Further Adorned by the Studies and Collections of the Fellows Now Living, of the Said College: Wherein You May Finde. 1. The Virtues, Qualities, and Properties of Every Simple ... 4. All the Medicices That Were in the Old Latin Dispensatory, and Are Left out in the New Latin One, Are Printed in This Fourth Impression in English ... 5. A Key to Galen's Method of Physick ... 6. In This Impression the Latin Name of Every One of the Compounds Is Printed, and in Whatpage of the New Folio Latin Book They Are to Be Found ...* (London: Printed by a Well-wisher to the Common-wealth of England, 1654), accessed March 12, 2017, <https://archive.org/stream/2548018R.nlm.nih.gov/2548018R#page/n73/mode/2up/search/mummy>, 77.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 46-47.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

a dram; beat them into powder." Culpeper's criticized the recipe, but not because of the use of mummy. He qualified that the whale sperm should be placed outside of the final product, rather than mixed within it.<sup>62</sup>

This is a small sample of a vast amount of pharmacological and medical literature of the Early Modern Era, but it represents the trend of medicinal cannibalism appropriately. In examination, medicinal cannibalism was widespread, with English, French, German, and Flemish texts all used in England. Many of these texts, and all of the ones surveyed, included human as an ingredient in a medical recipe. Also, although Paracelsus and his disciple van Helmont were instrumental in creating a philosophy for corpse medicine, Galenists participated in the trend as well, as seen by the College's and Renou's medical texts. It was widespread throughout society, yet still, it was only a small part of the pharmacological corpus. This alone is significant, because it can be inferred that the human body was simply another alchemical, chymical, or natural piece of matter that could be utilized for health. In the milieu of the times, new medicines were tried, and if they worked, they would be utilized. In the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, this included corpse medicine.

Thus far, scholars who study medicinal cannibalism have examined cannibalism with structuralist methodology and within the framework of historical cannibalism. However, it seems quite apparent that the human body was a rational medical ingredient in the Early Modern Era, and any future research should place medicinal cannibalism within this context. For a structuralist methodology to be effective, early modern medicinal cannibalism should appropriately be included in the medical use of human. Modern placenta consumption, blood transfusions, donor to donor organ transplants, and any other use of the human body used for health reasons would be an effective framework for early modern medicinal cannibalism. Here,

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 152-153.

the structuralist methodology could possibly thrive. Regardless, the structuralist and anthropological methodology needs to be removed from historical narrative, or at least seriously reconsidered. To the Early Modern European, it was a rational medicine that could potentially provide health benefits.

Van Helmont and Paracelsus would create the philosophical basis for the medical iconoclast traditions that they championed. As the opening quote in the beginning of this paper shows, the effectiveness of human was attributed to the natural power of celestial forces, the virtues found in the material of the skull, the mumie power formulated by Paracelsus, and the magnetism formulated by Van Helmont. The trend that they were instrumental in beginning has been viewed by recent scholars as an irrational and emotional response to a difficult church schism. However, Early Modern Europeans who engaged in corpse medicine need to be viewed as a rational fulfillment to the medieval alchemists and astrologers who received credibility from theologians, philosophers, and high society. This method appropriately destines their philosophy and their macabre medicine as a logical continuation with sound, historical roots. Medieval natural medicine took a strange turn, but this turn would eventually formulate the modern medical profession, the scientific method, modern chemistry, and the general milieu of a modern society.<sup>63</sup> These people were not considered emotional and irrational by their contemporaries, and that should not be our view either.

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<sup>63</sup> Of course, one must think of Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007) whenever we talk about the rise of natural philosophy. Van Helmont is one of many in this era who will create a natural philosophy where even miracles exist in natural places—created by God, but not explicitly controlled by God. Especially chapter 3—“The Great Disembedding” applies here appropriately, where Taylor shows the rise of natural philosophy and the fall of an enchanted society.

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