

“Plebs amat empirica”: Nicholas of Poland and His Critique of the Mediæval Medical Establishment

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In 1278, a Dominican friar named *Nicholas*, a German by birth, a medical practitioner in the Dominican convent at Cracow, and by all indications a highly charismatic personality, became the focus of a controversy resulting from the unconventional methods of healing that *Nicholas* advocated and promoted among the people in the region of Sieradz (near Cracow) in Lesser Poland. According to a report written by the chronicler *Rocznik Traski* (recorded in 1341), Friar *Nicholas*, while preaching and ministering in the countryside, “instructed the people to eat serpents, lizards, and frogs against any ailments they wished to avoid, whether it be sore eyes or other diseases.” Friar *Nicholas* never inspected urine samples, the report continued, but always carried with him certain closed pouches (*bursiculae clausae*) containing secret ingredients, which he suspended around patients’ necks at night. If the amulets caused patients to sweat and see visions during the night, *Nicholas* claimed, they would be cured, and if not, they would not be cured. *Nicholas* also taught the people how to catch serpents with their bare hands: they were to do it “in the name of *Nicholas*, not in Christ’s name, for whoever in Christ’s name tries to grab a serpent, even if he wears gloves, will be immediately bitten.”¹

Although the people were horrified by *Nicholas*’s loathsome dietary recommendations (*fuit abhominabilis omni populo*), his medical teachings apparently gained a considerable following: *Traski* records that the friars in the Dominican convent at Cracow ate serpents according to *Nicholas*’s recommendations, and that his ideas quickly spread until they reached the court of *Leszek the Black*, the duke of Sieradz and one of Lesser Poland’s more enlightened medieval princes. *Leszek*, wrote *Traski*, also followed *Nicholas*’s advice and urged the people to do likewise: “Lord *Leszek*, the duke of Sieradz, along with his wife *Griffinne*, according to the orders of the same friar, in that year [1278] began to eat serpents, lizards, and frogs, because it was abhorrent to all the people, and certified that they were efficacious medicaments.”²

Although there were various kinds of empirical healers to whom medieval people turned in the absence of (or in preference to) licensed physicians, including surgeons, apothecaries, midwives, cunning men, monks, and gifted hermits, the case of *Nicholas of Poland* stands quite apart from any of these. He was, to begin with, neither an untrained empiric nor, despite his unorthodox views, a charlatan. Educated in the arts at the Dominican *studium generale* at Montpellier and a resident of the city for twenty years, he had impeccable academic credentials, and was intimately familiar with the academic medical tradition at Montpellier, one of the leading medical schools of medieval Europe. *Nicholas* wrote excellent Latin, and while he may not have earned a medical degree, had a firm understanding of scholastic natural

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¹ Monumenta Poloniae historica, ed. August Bielowski, vol. II, Warsaw 1961, pp. 844–45.

² “Dominus eciam Lestco dux Syradie cum uxore sua Griphina per mandatam eiusdem Predicatoris eodem anno cepit comedere serpentes, lacertas et ranas, propter quod fuit abhominabilis omni populo, licet fuerint eis valde medicinales”, *ibid.*, p. 845.

philosophy and medical theory. What makes the case of *Nicholas of Poland* so interesting, however, is that he became an uncompromising critic of the rational system of medicine that was then being painfully constructed in the universities; and as the notice by the chronicler *Traski* indicates, he put his ideas into practice when he returned to Poland, becoming the originator of what appears to have been a genuine thirteenth-century "alternative medical movement." We know a great deal about the medical philosophy that *Nicholas* denounced. In the thirteenth century, there were few critics of it, so promising did that system seem.³ Although *Nicholas's* voice was that of a minority, his ideas bear close investigation because they suggest that, at the very moment when scholasticism seemed most persuasive, there were undercurrents of extreme discontent.

Aside from the brief notice by *Traski*, the only information we have concerning *Nicholas of Poland* (or Nicholas of Montpellier [Niklas von Mumpelir] as he is referred to in some sources) comes to us from his own writings. He was the author of two works, the most important of which was a fierce invective against scholastic medicine whose title, *Antipocras* [*Ant(i)hippocra(te)s*], reveals the principal target of *Nicholas's* attack. This work exists in a single fourteenth-century manuscript, Berlin codex Phillipps 1672. It was first edited by *Karl Sudhoff*, published a second time with emendations by *Hermann Diels*, and finally by *Ryszard Ganszyniec* in his collected edition of *Nicholas's* medical works.⁴ In addition to the *Antipocras*, *Nicholas* also left a collection of his medical *experimenta*, or the medicaments he claimed to have invented and used himself.⁵ There are eleven manuscripts of this work dating from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries. Portions of the *Experimenta* were translated into German and appear in a large number of fourteenth century *Arzneibücher*.⁶ Also attributed to *Nicholas* is a collection of medical recipes in German bearing the incipit, *Dyss ist ein hübsch Cyrurgia, dy do bewert is von meyster Nicklas von Monpolir, der wol XXX Jar sich hat geübet in der Cyrurgia*, which incorporates material from the *Experimenta*, along with additional recipes compiled mainly from the German version of a twelfth-century surgical handbook by *Roger Frugardis*.⁷ It is from the *Experimenta* that we learn that *Nicholas* was "a

³ See, however, the strident critique by *Roger Bacon: On the Errors of the Physicians*, ed. and trans. by E. S. Withington, in: *Essays on the History of Medicine Presented to Karl Sudhoff*, ed. *Charles Singer* and *Henry Ernest Sigerist*, Oxford 1924, pp. 139-58.

⁴ Berlin Codex Phillipps 1672 is described in: *Valentin Rose: Verzeichniss der Lateinischen Handschriften der Königlichen Bibliothek zu Berlin*, vol. I, Berlin 1893, pp. 369-74. For editions, see: *Karl Sudhoff: Antipocras, Streitschrift für mystische Heilkunde in Versen des Magisters Nikolaus von Polen*, *Sudhoffs Archiv* 9 (1916), 31-52; *Hermann Diels: Über die Schrift Antipocras des Nikolaus von Polen*, *Sitzungsberichte der Kgl. Preuss. Akademie der Wissenschaften* 16 (1916), 376-94; *Ryszard Ganszyniec: Brata Mikołaja z Polski Pisma Lekarskie*, Posen 1920 (= *Prace Naukowe Uniwersytetu Poznańskiego Sekcja Humanistyczna*, 2), pp. 44-71. All of our citations are to the *Ganszyniec* edition.

⁵ *John W. S. Johnsson*, ed.: Les "Experimenta magistri Nicolai". *Bulletin de la société français d'histoire de la médecine*, 10 (1911), 269-90; *Ganszyniec* (note 4), pp. 136-57.

⁶ See the forthcoming article by *Gundolf Keil: Nikolaus von Polen*, in: *Die deutsche Literatur des Mittelalters. Verfasserlexikon*, 2. Aufl., ed. *Karl Ruh* and *Gundolf Keil*, *Werner Schröder, Burghart Wachinger, Franz Josef Wortstbrock*, vol. 6, Berlin/New York.

⁷ For the *Hübsch Cyrurgia*, see: *Karl Sudhoff: Beiträge zur Geschichte der Chirurgie im Mittelalter*, vol. II, Leipzig 1918 (= *Studien zur Geschichte der Medizin*, Heft 11-12), pp. 490-94 (chapter contents only). Text edition by *Ganszyniec* (note 4), pp. 171-222. In addition, see *Gundolf Keil: Nikolaus von Mumpelir*, in: *Verfasserlexikon*, 2. Aufl. (note 6), Vol. 6, 1987, pp. 1123-24; *idem: Schlesien als Gegenstand med. Fachprosaforschung*, in: *Schlesien als Gegenstand interdisziplinärer Forschung*, ed. *L. Bossle et al.*, (= *Schlesische Forschungen*, 1), 1986, pp. 53-73. On the influence of *Roger Frugardis's* surgical manual in German-language areas, see: *Karl Sudhoff: Beitr. z. Gesch. d. Chir. im MA* (note 7),

physician (*medicus*) of Poland who had spent twenty years in Montpellier," and that he was, by reputation at least, an internationally famous empirical healer, "a man of such experience that before him there is not believed to have been his like, nor is it hoped for in the future, as is plain in his marvelous works in making great and sudden cures in various provinces and regions."⁸

It is possible, from textual and external evidence, to construct a rough but plausible approximation of *Nicholas's* life and intellectual development. On the basis of linguistic evidence from *Nicholas's* writings and *Traski's* notice (*Nicolaus, natione Theutonicus*), we can be reasonably confident that *Nicholas* was a German by birth, probably from Silesia, where, from the early thirteenth century, large numbers of German immigrants had settled.⁹ That *Nicholas* resided in Montpellier for some time is clear not only from the statement to that effect in the *Experimenta* but also from the orthography and format of the *Antipocras*. This work is a long poem written in leonine verse, a style that was prevalent in academic circles at the time.¹⁰ It was well known and widely imitated in Montpellier because it had been highly developed in Salernitan medical works, notably the *Regimen sanitatis*. *Gilles de Corbeil* (ca. 1140–1224), one of the Salernitan masters and a professor at Montpellier in the early thirteenth century, had written several medical poems in leonine verse, all of which would have been familiar to students of *Nicholas's* generation.¹¹ Moreover, the *Antipocras* contains numerous Occitanian words and spellings, which could have been used only by a writer familiar with languedoc, the dialect of the Montpellier region.

pp. 148–394; *Gundolf Keil*: *Gestaltwandel und Zersetzung. Roger-Urtext und Roger-Glosse vom 12. bis ins 16. Jahrhundert*, in: *Der Kommentar in der Renaissance*, ed. *August Buck* and *Otto Herding*, Bonn and Boppard, 1975 (= DFG, Kommission für Humanismusforschung, Mitteilung 1), pp. 209–24; *idem*: *Chirurg von der Weser*, in: *Verfasserlexikon*, 2 Aufl. (note 6), vol. I, 1196–97; *Ryszard Ganszyniec*: *Zur Chirurgie des Wilhelm de Congenis*, *Sudhoffs Archiv* 13 (1921), 166–70; *Astrid Hirschmann*: *Die Leipziger Rogerglosse: Ein chirurgischer Text aus dem meissnisch-nordschlesischen Raum*, Teil I: Text, Pattensen, Han. 1984 (= *Würzburger medizinhistorische Forschungen*, 33).

⁸ "Incipiunt Experimenta Fratris Nicolai, medici de Polonia, qui fuit in Monte Pessulano 20 annis, qui tante fuerat experientie, quod ante ipsum non creditur similis ei fuisse, nec speratur de futuro: sicut patet in miris operibus suis, in diversis provinciis et regionibus curas magnas et subitas faciendo", *Experimenta*, ed. *Ganszyniec* (note 4), p. 136.

⁹ *The Cambridge History of Medieval Europe*, ed. *J. R. Tanner*, *C. W. Previte-Orton*, and *Z. N. Brooke*, vol. VI, Cambridge 1964, pp. 458–9; *The Cambridge History of Poland*, ed. *W. F. Reddaway*, *J. H. Penson*, *O. Halecki*, and *R. Dyboski*, vol. I, Cambridge 1950, pp. 125–40; *Westermanns Grosser Atlas zur Weltgeschichte*, Braunschweig 1956, Karte 82, I: *Herkunft und Volkstum der Krakauer Neubürger*. *Ganszyniec* (note 4, p. 5) questions the assertion (by *Sudhoff*) that *Nicholas* was a German, on the grounds that *natione Theutonicus* (*Traski*, note 1, p. 844) may only refer to *Nicholas's* university affiliation. Since there were no Polish nations in the western universities, Polish students were normally affiliated with the German nations; hence, *Ganszyniec* argues, *Nicholas* may have been a Pole. Yet *Traski's* reference to *Nicholas's* nationality clearly does not refer to *Nicholas's* university affiliation, but to his actual place of birth, namely, Silesia.

¹⁰ *Stephen D'Irsay*: *The Life and Works of Gilles de Corbeil*, *Annals of Medicine* 7 (1925), 363. The medical poems of *Gilles de Corbeil* were edited by *Louis Choulant*: *Carmina medica*, Leipzig 1826. Cf. the letter of a Montpellier student, *Gilles de Bazoches* in: *Marcel Fournier*: *Les Statuts et privilèges des universités françaises*, vol. II, Paris 1891, p. 3, no. 880.

¹¹ *D'Irsay* (note 10); *Gernot Rath*: *Gilles de Corbeil as a Critic of His Age*, *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 38 (1964), 133–38; *Dieter Josef Scheler*: *Die Ierpigra ad purgandos prelatons des Egidius von Corbeil*, Univ. Würzburg, phil. Fak. Diss. 1972 (Teildruck Bochum 1972); *Arnald of Villanova*: *De conservanda bona valetudine opusculum Scholae Salernitanæ, ad Regem Angliæ, Frankfurt*, Christian Egenolff, 1554 (we are grateful to Prof. Dr. Françoise Paheau for this reference).

It is doubtful, however, that *Nicholas* received a medical degree from Montpellier. Not only would his affiliation with the friars be an obstacle (although not absolutely so) to entering the medical profession, his name does not appear in the *cartulaire* of the university – although, to be sure, the records of masters and professors for the mid-thirteenth century are far from complete.¹² In the Latin text of the *Experimenta*, *Nicholas* is referred to as "medicus," but such a designation was applied to non-licensed practitioners as well as holders of medical degrees. The German *Hübsch Chirurgia* refers to him as "meyster Nicklas", although here the implication is that of a master of surgery and not medicine ("sich hat geübet in der Chirurgia"). Yet *Nicholas's* command of academic learning is indisputable: not only was he capable of writing complex and elegant Latin verse, he used words and concepts from the academic vocabulary with ease and assurance, including many of Greek origin.¹³ Indeed, *Nicholas* probably taught the liberal arts at the Dominican *studium* at Montpellier, and it is not unlikely that he also lectured to students in the medical college, who were expected to have a firm grounding in the liberal arts before or during their medical studies.¹⁴ In any case, the division between the liberal arts and medicine was not very clearly drawn at Montpellier during this period, and students probably attended lectures in various *studia*. Moreover, Montpellier was a relatively small city with more liberal and democratic institutions than those prevailed elsewhere. Thus *Nicholas*, though probably an arts master and not a physician, was never isolated from developments in the college of medicine. He followed them closely, and gained an intimate familiarity with the growing emphasis on theory over clinical practice that was being stressed there as at other European universities. Although he insisted that his own medicaments were "empirical", *Nicholas* was no illiterate, untrained empiric; he was an educated man.

In all probability (judging from his Latin), *Nicholas* not only taught at the Dominican *studium* at Montpellier, but also took his arts degree there. In other words, he must have gone to Montpellier as a fairly young man, perhaps immediately after completing elementary schooling in Poland. His decision to enter the Order of Preachers (chartered in Poland in 1223) may have been for him, as it was for many youths without independent wealth or patronage, a means of entry into a university.¹⁵ The Dominican teachers, who played an instrumental role in introducing scholastic culture to Poland, would have given *Nicholas* an excellent preparation for the liberal arts course.¹⁶ Since the Dominican *studium* at Montpellier was established in 1248, we can mark this date as a *terminus post quem* for the beginning of his

¹² *P. Pansier*: Les maîtres de la faculté de médecine de Montpellier au moyenage, *Janus* 9 (1904), 442–51; 499–511; 527–45; 593–602; 10 (1905), 58–68; 113–21.

¹³ *Diels* (note 4), pp. 377–8.

¹⁴ *Vern Bullough*: The Development of the Medical University at Montpellier to the End of the Fourteenth Century, *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 30 (1956), 508–23; *Sonoma Cooper*: The Medical School of Montpellier in the Fourteenth Century, *Annals of Medicine*, n.s. 2 (1930), pp. 164–95 (p. 171); *Hastings Rashdall*: The Universities of Europe in the Middle Ages, ed. *E. M. Powicke* and *A. B. Emden*, vol. II, Cambridge 1936, pp. 116–39.

¹⁵ On education in the Dominican grammar schools and *studia* (including a brief survey of schools in central Europe by *Jerzy Kloczowski*, pp. 127–49), see the essays in: *Le scuole degli ordine mendicanti (secoli XIII–XIV)*, *Todi* 1978 (= *Convegna del Centro di Studi sulla Spiritualità Medievale*, 17); *Rashdall* (note 14), pp. 370–97.

¹⁶ *Jerzy Kloczowski*: Les ordres mendiants en Pologne à la fin du Moyen-Age, *Acta Poloniae Historica* 15 (1967), 5–38.

twenty-year residency in that city.¹⁷ The *terminus ante quem* of his Montpellier residency is 1278 (or perhaps a few years earlier, considering the growing influence of his teaching in the vicinity of Cracow), by which date *Nicholas* had already returned to Poland, as noted by *Traski*. The normal age for a student entering a university in the Middle Ages was about sixteen; thus *Nicholas* was probably born in the 1230s, or roughly between 1234 and 1240. After completing his studies (the liberal arts course took about eight years to reach the level of *magister*), *Nicholas* apparently remained in Montpellier, perhaps as a lecturer in the Dominican *studium generale*. These dates imply that the period during which *Nicholas* wrote his medical works must have been between 1270 and 1278, i.e., a time somewhere between twenty years after the beginning of his residency at Montpellier and the date noted by *Traski*, when *Nicholas* reached the height of his influence in Lesser Poland. Apparently *Nicholas* returned to Silesia in the early 1270s, and soon thereafter entered the Dominican convent at Cracow, which was established in 1260 by *Leszek the Black's* father, the Piast Duke *Casimir of Kujawia*.¹⁸ There, as part of the ministerial duties that attended his office as a friar, *Nicholas* no doubt provided medical as well as spiritual care to the people, and put into practice the unorthodox methods and ideas he had developed at Montpellier.

The period during which *Nicholas of Poland* studied and perhaps taught at Montpellier (ca. 1250–1270) is unfortunately one of which very little is known about the institutional and intellectual development of the university.¹⁹ Although its chartulary begins to give a somewhat clearer picture of the university's organization after the middle of the century, the literary productivity of the school first becomes significant only in the 1280s and 1290s with the writings of *Bernard of Gordon* and *Arnald of Villanova*. For the time during which *Nicholas* resided in Montpellier, there is, as *Michael McVaugh* put it, "almost unbroken silence".²⁰

Thanks largely to *McVaugh's* research, however, some important new details concerning Montpellier's intellectual development at mid-century have come to light, and they reveal the university in a state of rapid transition. In the mid-twelfth century, the university was already a famous seat of medical learning in southern Europe. An important city of international trade, Montpellier was a meeting-place of several cultures. Because of its geographical position, the university was influenced by the Moslem schools of Spain, the Jewish schools of southern France, and by Christian Salerno, in decline since the late-twelfth century. Salernitan masters who taught at Montpellier in the twelfth-century included *Bernardus Provenzalis*, *Matheus Salomon*, *Benevenutus Hyerosolimitanus*, and *Gilles de Corbeil*.²¹ Jewish and Moslem masters from Spain, many of whom were forced to leave the country by growing

¹⁷ *P. Heinrich Denifle*: Die Entstehung der Universitäten des Mittelalters bis 1400, vol. I, Berlin 1885, p. 348.

¹⁸ *Ganszyniec* (note 4), p. 7.

¹⁹ See, in addition to the references in notes 12 and 14: *Alexander Germain*, ed.: Cartulaire de l'université de Montpellier, 2 vols., Montpellier 1890–1912; *Jean Astruc*: Memoires pour servir a l'histoire de la faculté de médecine de Montpellier, Paris 1767; *Sonoma Cooper*: The Development of the Medical School of Montpellier, diss. University of California, Berkeley, 1938; *Louis Dulieu*: La Médecine a Montpellier, vol. I, Avignon 1975; *Vern. L. Bullough*: The Development of Medicine as a Profession, Basel/New York 1966, pp. 52–60.

²⁰ *Michael McVaugh*: An Early Discussion of Medicinal Degrees at Montpellier by Henry of Winchester, Bulletin of the History of Medicine 49 (1975), 57.

²¹ *Bullough* (note 14), p. 511; *Pansier* (note 12), pp. 443–51.

intolerance, also came to Montpellier, introducing elements that were to be considered characteristic of the instruction there.²²

These various cultural influences had a lasting effect on medical teaching at Montpellier. With the introduction of newly-translated works by *Galen* (notably *De simplicibus medicinis*), the complex theories of *Avicenna's Canon*, and other Graeco-Arabic philosophical texts, concern with theory began to overshadow the traditional emphasis upon clinical medicine.²³ As these new sources and methods were assimilated at Montpellier, medical instruction became increasingly scholasticized. Philosophical speculation was reintroduced into medicine on a large scale, and academic medicine at Montpellier, reflecting the general development of scholastic thought itself, was transformed from a largely clinical and empirical art into an academic discipline with a markedly more philosophical or theoretical orientation.²⁴

When *Nicholas of Poland* arrived in Montpellier around 1250, these changes were just beginning to be evident. The Montpellier medical tradition reached the height of its distinction and sophistication a generation or two after *Nicholas* left Montpellier, between 1280 and 1320.²⁵ But between 1250 and 1270, when *Nicholas* resided at Montpellier, the intellectual foundations of the theoretical medicine that later flourished at the school were being built. *Nicholas*, who witnessed the early stages of the transformation of Montpellier and its medical curriculum, was to become one of the most outspoken critics of the new order that was established.

The scholasticization of medicine that was taking place at Montpellier in the second half of the thirteenth century is best illustrated by reference to two subjects that elicited extended philosophical discussion among the Montpellier masters: the concept of medicinal degrees and theriac. The notion that the "complexion" or qualitative nature of a body can be measured on a scale of four degrees plus a point of balance or temperancy is a concept that goes back to *Galen*. It was also discussed in the *Isagoge* of *Johannitius* (*Hunain ibn Ishag*, d. 877), one of the constituents of the *Articella*, a collection of Latin translations of Greek and Arabic medical writings that was available in the West since the twelfth century. As *McVaugh* has shown, the Montpellier masters developed a new treatment of medicinal degrees that made possible a mathematical theory of compound medicines.²⁶ Although this was primarily the achievement

²² *Cooper* (note 14), p. 167; *D'Irsay* (note 10); *Ernest Wickersheimer*: *La question du Judéo-Arabisme a Montpellier*, *Janus* 31 (1927), 465-73.

²³ Cf. *John M. Riddle*: *Theory and Practice in Medieval Medicine*, *Viator* 5 (1974), 157-84. A more positive interpretation is suggested by *Luke Demaitre*: *Theory and Practice in Medical Education at the University of Montpellier in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries*, *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 30 (1975), 103-23.

²⁴ A similar process took place at Salerno at the end of the twelfth century. See *Wolfgang Stürmer*, ed., *Urso von Salerno. De complexionibus elementorum libellus*, Stuttgart 1976 (= *Stuttgarter Beiträge zur Geschichte und Politik*, 7); *Morris Harold Saffron*, ed.: *Maurus of Salerno, Twelfth Century "Optimus Physicus"*. With his Commentary on the Prognostics of Hippocrates, Philadelphia 1972 (= *Trans. of the American Philosophical Society*, n.s. 62, part 7).

²⁵ *Michael McVaugh*: *Quantified Theory and Medical Practice at Fourteenth-Century Montpellier*, *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 43 (1969), 397-413; *idem*: *Theriac at Montpellier 1285-1325* (with an edition of the *Questiones de tyriaca* of William of Brescia), *Sudhoffs Archiv* 8 (1972), 113-44; *Luke E. Demaitre*: *Doctor Bernard de Gordon: Professor and Practitioner*, Toronto 1980 (= *Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, Studies and Texts*, 51).

²⁶ *McVaugh* (1969: note 25). For a more comprehensive account of the pharmacological tradition at Montpellier, see *idem*, ed.: *Arnaldi de Villanova Opera medica omnia*, edd. *L. Garcia-Ballester*, *J. A. Paniagua*, and *Michael McVaugh*, vol. II, Granada/Barcelona 1975 (= *Seminarium Historiae Medicae Granatensis*), pp. 1-136.

of *Arnald of Villanova*, writing in the 1290s, *McVaugh* has pointed out that the discussion *de gradibus* began much earlier, appearing for the first time in a treatise by *Henry of Winchester*, who was named chancellor of the medical faculty in 1239/40, and who may still have been on the medical faculty when *Nicholas of Poland* arrived in Montpellier around 1250.²⁷ The elaborate pharmacological theory developed at Montpellier had important benefits in the area of natural philology, as *McVaugh* has shown; but its practical application to medicine was dubious at best. Indeed, for the ordinary physician, the administration of drugs, formerly guided by simple empirical rules, became governed by a theory so complex as to be almost unworkable.²⁸

Another issue that assumed an important place in the discussions of the medical college at Montpellier was theriac, the ancient antidote against poison, which was widely regarded in the Middle Ages as a panacea.²⁹ The first extended theoretical discussion of the theriac was not written at Montpellier until the 1280s, when *Bernard of Gordon* composed his *Tractatus de tyriaca* in response to the recent appearance of *Averroes's* work of the same title. Nevertheless, *Galen* and the Arabic authors had made many passing references to theriac, and prescriptions for compounding the drug were found in most standard pharmaceutical guides, such as the *Antidotarium Nicholai* and the *Liber iste*.³⁰ Although western authors had only an incomplete and often contradictory picture of the drug, there was undoubtedly a good deal of interest in the subject for several decades preceding the Latin translation of *Averroes's* treatise. As we shall see, *Nicholas* was also fascinated by theriac, although he interpreted its virtues in a radically different way than did the Montpellier masters.

The medicinal virtues of theriac presented a challenging problem to medieval academics because it was a drug unique in its therapeutic powers, well known and widely prescribed in authoritative medical literature, but one for whose potency no rational account existed.³¹ In many ways, theriac underscored the limits of scholastic medicine, for it belonged to a class of substances (including the magnet and the basilisk) with occult powers. Like the magnet, its unique virtues could not be predicted from the nature of the ingredients composing it, the most outstanding of which was serpent's flesh prepared according to elaborate and carefully controlled procedures. Nor could its powers be understood or explained by reason, but could be known only by experience. For physicians and natural philosophers of the thirteenth century, theriac symbolized the strictly empirical element, irreducible to rational, theoretical

²⁷ *McVaugh* (note 20).

²⁸ *Riddle* (note 23), 172f. *Nicholas of Poland* contemptuously rebuked this pharmacological tradition in *Antipocras*, where he wrote: "Dic ergo, si scis, que sit complexio piscis, quo sic curatur cecus demouque fugatur", ed. *Ganzsyniec* (note 4), p. 40, v. 30-31.

²⁹ *McVaugh* (1972: note 25). *Bernard of Gordon* prescribed theriac for more than a dozen diseases, from migraine to pestilence; *Demaitre* (note 21), p. 76. For the general history of theriac, see *Gilbert Watson: Theriac and Mithridatium*, London 1966.

³⁰ *Henry Ernest Sigerist: Das Salernitanische Antidotarium und seine Quellen*, in: *Studien und Texte zur frühmittelalterlichen Rezeptliteratur*, Leipzig 1923 (= *Studien zur Geschichte der Medizin*, 13), pp. 187-95 (cf. additional theriac recipes in *antidotaria* dating from the ninth and tenth centuries, *ibid*, pp. 29, 47, 54, 74, 113, 115); *Erwin Müller*, ed.: *Der Traktat Liber Iste* (die sogenannten Glossae Platearii) aus dem Breslauer Codex Salernitanus, Würzburg 1942 (= *Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der Naturwissenschaften*, 7), p. 48; *Konrad Goehl: Kurzindex zum pseudoplatearischen 'Liber iste'*, in: "gelährte der arzenie, ouch apoteker", *Festschrift Willem F. Daems, Pattenson*, Han. 1982 (= *Würzburger medizinhistorische Forschungen*, 24), pp. 655-66.

³¹ For the following discussion of the philosophical problem of theriac in the Middle Ages, we are indebted to *McVaugh* (1972: note 25).

categories, in natural phenomena. It was, to use a modern analogy, an “anomaly” in contemporary medical theory. To the scholastic physicians at Montpellier, theriac was a troubling problem that would require considerable philosophical effort to resolve. To *Nicholas of Poland*, it symbolized the bankruptcy of the scholastic system itself.

In the *Antipocras*, *Nicholas* vehemently rejected the scholastic medical tradition that was being developed at Montpellier. In this versified polemic, *Nicholas* played the role of an advocate defending his empirical method of practice, which he claimed brought miraculous cures in many nations, against the rational method of the academic physicians and apothecaries. The method of the “Hippocratic” physicians, he charged, were nothing more than fraudulent lies masked by polished words, serving only to enhance the reputations of physicians and multiply the deaths of patients.³² *Nicholas*, however, did not stop with this. He repudiated the very premise of the scholastic medical program and its attempt to make practice subservient to theory. Attacking the physicians’ tendency to rely on reason and authority over experience, *Nicholas* wrote, “Here the advocate rejects the authority of Galen, who says, ‘Physician, how can you cure, when you are ignorant of the causes?’ I show that a cure can well be effected without knowledge of the cause, Galen.”³³

The highly unorthodox medical practice that *Nicholas* promulgated in the villages surrounding Cracow and in Upper Silesia was an application of this radically anti-intellectual, anti-scholastic position. Urging a return to “natural” methods of healing (*morbum natura sanat medici sine cura*), *Nicholas* attributed extraordinary virtues to the most exotic and revolting remedies, such as toads, scorpions, and serpents. His strange and revolting arsenal of drugs was based upon his belief that the most common and contemptible drugs contained far greater medicinal virtues than the “precious and famous” medicaments recommended by orthodox physicians.³⁴ *Nicholas* mentions one of these “precious and famous” medicaments by name: *tyria*, or theriac. Moreover, he dedicated an entire section of the *Experimenta* to various preparations and uses of serpent’s flesh, the principle ingredient in theriac. Yet *Nicholas*’s conception theriac had nothing whatsoever to do with the elaborate rationalizations of its virtues developed by the Montpellier masters. Instead, it was inspired by a philosophical conviction he had developed at Montpellier: that while God had conferred marvelous virtues on all of nature, “the more filthy, abominable, and common things are, the more they participate” in these marvelous virtues.³⁵

Throughout the *Antipocras*, *Nicholas* repeatedly enunciated the principle that “great miracles abide in the lowliest things.”³⁶ It was the mainspring of his medical teaching, and was the theoretical principle that guided his *experimenta*, the remedies he prescribed to patients. Indeed, the more revolting and “common” were the ingredients that went into his medicaments, *Nicholas* believed, the more marvelous would their virtues become. To break a bladder stone, he recommended that patients drink his “snake powder” (*pulverem serpentis*) in wine twice daily. But to make the drug even more effective, he added powdered toads; and

³² *Antipocras*, ed. Ganszyniec (note 4), p. 66, v. 336–45.

³³ “Hic improbat actor auctoritatem Galieni, quod dicit: Medice, quomodo sanas, si causam ignoras? Hoc in sermone sine cause cognitione monstro posse bene curam fieri, Galiene”, *ibid*, p. 46.

³⁴ “Hic innuitur, quod virtus sit magis in contemptibilibus quam preciosis et famosis rebus”, *ibid*, p. 52.

³⁵ “Hic asserit, quod, quanto res sunt turpiores et abominabiliores et bene notiores, tanto magis participant de hac virtute, de qua est tractatus”, *ibid*, p. 60.

³⁶ See, for example, *ibid*, verses 51, 55, 68, 199.

best of all was a concoction made of powdered serpents, toads, and scorpions.³⁷ He made pills of dried frogs, which he prescribed as a remedy for weak hearts and sore eyes, and promised they would make the troubled sleep. His favorite remedy (*curat universa*), however, was serpents' flesh, carefully prepared according to detailed instructions spelled out in the *Experimenta*.³⁸ He recommended that kings, dukes, and other noblemen eat it at every meal.³⁹ It was good not just for the nobility, however, but for everyone: "And briefly according to the doctrine of friar Nicholas, it is advantageous for all people, of whatever station, to eat serpents whenever it is possible to get them."⁴⁰

Nicholas did not attempt to explain the marvelous virtues of serpents' flesh, or of toads and scorpions, any more than he ventured to explain the various *mirabilia* that he recounted in the *Antipocras*. Indeed, he insisted that for such "marvels" no rational, scientific account is possible; They were consequences simply of the "goodness of God" given to the lowly things born of the earth.⁴¹ "The miraculously engendered divine virtue always loves the lowliest creatures," wrote *Nicholas*. "Not scorning to look upon worthless things, it visits these common things and abides with them. And as for the proof of this, it is made plain by their effects." Thus *Nicholas's* "empiricism" becomes allied with his profound skepticism of the philosophical tradition. "Why is this so?" he asks in the *Antipocras*. "I don't know; you don't know. I only know that what is strong is a thing born of something of no value."⁴²

Nicholas of Poland's critique of official medicine was grounded upon an essentially religious position, reflecting a profound skepticism of the scholastic effort to explain the mystery of the creation, and a deep distrust of the physicians' attempts to heal by naturalistic means alone, without the intervention of God. The effort by scholastic physicians, following the Hippocratic philosophy, to exclude the miraculous from medicine was according to *Nicholas* an impossibility, because all true healing agents, since they emanate from God, are miraculous. That God had conferred the most marvelous virtues on the least-esteemed creatures was further proof of the fallacies of reason. *Nicholas's* medical writings bear the imprint of a man who was contemptuous of philosophy. Knowledge of causes, he insisted, was an impossibility, and all the invented categories of philosophy were only words signifying nothing; ignorance, except of that which God has revealed, is man's condition.⁴³ *Nicholas's* insistence on the primacy of revealed, intuitional truth as opposed to the inventions of philosophy reflected a desire to return to a religion of humble piety. His conviction that the secrets of nature are discovered by experience instead of reason went hand in hand with his preference for faith over theology.

At the same time, *Nicholas's* assertion of the poverty of philosophy and the superior authority of experience over reason reflected a strong ethical commitment, and a pronounced ideological bias. In a direct challenge to the haughty Galenic question, "Physician how can

³⁷ *Experimenta*, ed. *Ganszyniec* (note 5), pp. 136–38.

³⁸ *Ibid*, "Capitulum de serpentibus", pp. 142–48.

³⁹ *Ibid*, p. 144.

⁴⁰ "Et breviter secundum doctrinam Fratris Nicolai omni homini, in quocunque statu sit, expedit, ut serpentem, quocunque tempore habere possit, comedat", *ibid*, p. 144.

⁴¹ "Vis elementalis non est neque materialis, quam terre natis sic dat bonitas deitatis, immo formalis acsi sit vis animalis", *Antipocras*, ed. *Ganszyniec* (note 4), p. 48, v. 37–39.

⁴² "Sed virtus diva mirabilium genitiva, semper amans humiles. Non spernens visere viles, hoc patet effectu. Cur est ibi? nescio, nec tu scis; scio, quod fortis sit res in vilibus ortis", *ibid*, p. 58, v. 199–203.

⁴³ "Cur hoc sit, non legis in me. Qualiter aut forte virtus fluit ex aliqua re, dum res est clausa, non est michi cognita causa", *ibid*, p. 62, v. 286–88. Cf. p. 46, v. 30–31.

you cure?," *Nicholas* praised the *vis empiricorum* that miraculously gives words to the mute, hearing to the deaf, and sight to the blind, and contemptuously confronted the physicians with a question of his own: "How do you dare cure, if you don't rejoice in healing?"⁴⁴ Why, he asked, is medicine according to Hippocratic doctrine not instructed to "pluck the fruits" of the marvelous properties that God had infused in things? "Perhaps because in this lot he [Hippocrates] was a pauper," *Nicholas* answered, "or rather, perhaps because the prophet prayed that there might not be many like Hippocrates."⁴⁵ Since God always loves the humble, thought *Nicholas*, he has chosen to reveal his deepest secrets to ordinary people, just as he had conferred the most marvelous medical virtues on the meanest beings in nature.⁴⁶ Hence the common people of the villages had deeper insights into the secrets of nature than the learned physicians: "The people love empirical things," wrote *Nicholas*, "because they do no one any harm; but the physicians are ashamed because great works have a preference for the villages, where the marketplaces resound in their praises of empirical remedies."⁴⁷ He had not attempted to convince the "Judases" of medicine (i.e., the physicians) of his teachings, *Nicholas* wrote, because they would not be convinced of truths that the people already knew.⁴⁸

In view of *Nicholas's* avowed admiration for the "wisdom of the people," it might be tempting to suppose that his medical ideas reflected folk beliefs long held by the villagers of Upper Silesia. As a preaching friar, *Nicholas* would certainly have been familiar with the folklore of the countryside, and he made no secret of his ideological sympathies. However, such a supposition, while superficially plausible, would probably be mistaken. Not only is positive evidence for folk-medicinal uses of snakes in Poland and Silesia lacking, but taboos against eating serpent's flesh might have made the *Nicholas's* recommendations repugnant to many. Indeed, *Traski* explicitly states that the people found *Nicholas's* recommendations "abominable" (*fuit abhominabilis omni populi*).⁴⁹ More likely sources of *Nicholas's* ideas were the theriac discussions at Montpellier (with which *Nicholas* was surely familiar), and the various *Schlangentraktate* that circulated among physicians, apothecaries, and medical students in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. These works, which become more abundant in the early fourteenth century (notably after the appearance of *William of Brescia's* treatise on theriac), may in part represent a sort of "vulgarization" of the theriac discussions then current at Montpellier.⁵⁰ At least, they suggest that contemporary with the academic

⁴⁴ "Qua si non gaudes cura, curare quid audes?", *ibid*, p. 56, v. 183.

⁴⁵ "Cur ab Ypocrate de lati proprietate non est instructum medicine carpare fructum? Forsan in hac sorte pauper fuit, aut quia forte precavit vates, ne multi sint Ypocrates", *ibid*, p. 60, v. 237-40.

⁴⁶ Cf. note 42.

⁴⁷ "Plebs amat empirica, quia nulli sunt inimica; sed pudor est medicis, quod ovent magnalia vicis, consona facta fora laxant in laudibus ora", *ibid*, p. 56, v. 186-88.

⁴⁸ "Sed non ostendere novi hoc in devotis nec complicibus Scariotis. Ut proprium pignus opifex fovet ista benignus: mundus eis dignus, nunquam fuit iste malignus", *ibid*, p. 52, v. 123-26.

⁴⁹ *Traski* (note 1), p. 845. *Traski*, of course, may have been referring only to the citizens of Cracow (at this time all Germans from the West), and not the villagers of Silesia.

⁵⁰ *McVaugh* (1972: note 24). An early reference to *William of Brescia's* theriac treatise occurs in a *Regimin sanitatus* composed in Avignon by *Arnold of Bamberg* before 1317; cf. *Karin Figala: Mainfränkische Zeitgenossen 'Ortolf von Baierland'. Ein Beitrag zum frühesten Gesundheitswesen in den Bistümen Würzburg und Bamberg, Inaugural-Diss. München 1969, pp. 188-90; Thomas Holste: Der Theriakrämer. Ein Beitrag zur Frühgeschichte der Arzneimittelwerbung, Pattensen, Han. 1976 (= Würzburger medizinhistorische Forschungen, 5), pp. 31, 55-57, and German translation (ca. 1350) of *Arnold's* theriac chapter, pp. 89-91. See also *idem: Vom Dosisproblem zum Arzneimittelbegleitschein. Wege der Vulgarisierung bei der Theriak-Diskussion, Medizinhistorisches Journal 4 (1979), 18-21; Thomas Holste and Gundolf Keil: Ein Strassburger altdeutscher Theriaktraktat, Würzburger medizinhistorisches Journal 4 (1979), 18-21.**

dispute over the virtues of theriac, there was also widespread interest in the subject at a more popular level.

The most famous of these *Schlangentraktate* was the *Experimenta duodecim* attributed to *Johannes Paulinus*, manuscripts of which are often found in the same codices containing *Nicholas's Experimenta*.⁵¹ The author of this tract (whose identity is unknown) writes that the work was a translation of a book by *Alanus physicus*, which *Johannes* claims he found in Alexandria.⁵² It contains twelve "experiments" with snake skin, which according to *Johannes* should be pulverized when the moon is in the first degree of Aries; it will heal wounds of the head, terrify enemies, make a man speak persuasively, and enable him to see into the future or win the love of a woman. Although the *Experimenta duodecim* of *Johannes Paulinus* appeared at roughly the same time as the *Nicholas's Experimenta*, the two works are in fact quite different in one important respect. While the *Experimenta duodecim* has much in common with the Arabic magical treatises that stem from Hellenistic sources (such as the *Kyranides*), *Nicholas's Experimenta* is remarkably more "experimental" in flavor.⁵³ Its careful, detailed descriptions of the preparation of serpent's flesh in the *capitulum de serpentibus*, and the equally detailed instructions for making *oleum serpentis* and *pulvis serpentis*, leave little doubt that *Nicholas* actually prepared the drugs that he described.⁵⁴ It is, in other words, not merely a copy or translation of a text on the medicinal virtues of serpents (as the *Experimenta duodecim* and other *Schlangentraktate* may well have been), but very probably a work based upon the author's real experience.

Nicholas, indeed, insisted that he had written nothing that he not had first proved by experience (*non sit aliud quicquam insertum, nisi quod ex usu expertum est*). Yet it is significant that he invoked the authority of "master Albert" to confirm his doctrine, for assuredly *Nicholas* meant the *pseudo-Albertus Magnus* of the *De mirabilibus mundi*, a manuscript of which may have circulated within the Dominican community at Montpellier.⁵⁵

storische Forschungen 24 (1982), 511–22; *Emil Höring*: Der schwäbische Theriak-Pesttraktat von 1389, *Medizinische Monatschrift* 30 (1976), 308–11.

⁵¹ *John W. S. Johnsson*: Les 'Experimenta duodecim Johannes Paulini', *Bulletin de la société française d'histoire de la médecine* 12 (1913), 257–67. Gundolf Keil has examined 27 manuscripts of the *Experimenta duodecim*, the contents of which are nearly identical; there was, in other words, no apparent interaction between the textual and folk traditions (see article forthcoming in: *Verfasserlexikon*, 2. Aufl. [note 6]).

⁵² 'Alanus' appears in various manuscripts as Acharius, Algani, Alcaus, and Alcanus, *Johnsson* (note 51), 257.

⁵³ Some medieval texts of the *Kyranides*, a treatise on the "marvelous" virtues of plants, animals, and stones, have been edited by *Louis Delatte*: *Textes latins et vieux français relatifs aux Cyranides*, Liege 1942 (= *Bibliothèque de la Faculté de Philosophie et Lettres de l'Université de Liege*, 93). In addition, see *Manfred Ullmann*: *Die Natur- und Geheimwissenschaften im Islam*, in: *Handbuch der Orientalistik*, ed. *B. Spuler*, erste Abt., *Ergänzungsbd. VI*, zweiter Abschn. Leiden 1972; *Joseph Sturmer*: "von demegire". *Mittelalterliche Wunderdrogentraktate*, I, Pattensen, Han. 1978 (= *Würzburger medizinhistorische Forschungen*, 12); *idem*: *Weitere Überlieferungen des mittelhochdeutschen "Geiertraktats" sowie eine altdeutsche Überlieferung der "Epistula de vulture"*, *Würzburger medizinhistorische Forschungen* 24 (1982), 443–78; *Annelore Högemann*: *Der altdeutsche "Eichenmisteltraktat"*, *Mittelalterliche Wunderdrogentraktate II*, Pattensen, Han., 1981 (= *Würzburger medizinhistorische Forschungen*, 19); *Sabine Kurschat-Fellinger*: *Kranewitt. Untersuchungen zu den altdeutschen Überlieferungen des nordischen Wacholderbeertraktats*, Pattensen, Han. 1983 (= *Würzburger medizinhistorische Forschungen*, 20).

⁵⁴ Ed. *Ganszyniec* (note 4), "Capitulum de serpentibus", pp. 142–46.

⁵⁵ "Hic inducitur magister Albertus ad confirmandum que dicta sunt et dicenda. Verbis Albertus verax et dogmate certus hoc sine figmento docet et probat experimento", *Antipocras*, ed. *Ganszyniec* (note 4), p. 48.

This work, a short theoretical treatise on magic, is in most manuscripts accompanied by an "empirical" treatise (in fact a compilation of "secrets" and "experiments" drawn from various sources) entitled *Liber aggregationis* (otherwise *Experimenta Alberti* or *Secreta Alberti*), also attributed to *Albertus*, comprising a sort of general handbook on magic and "marvels".⁵⁶ It is possible that the author (or compiler) of the work was a pupil or follower of *Albertus*, for as Thorndike points out, it "pretends to be a product of [Albertus's] experimental school among the Dominicans at Cologne."⁵⁷ The two works together became immensely popular in the late Middle Ages and went through numerous printed editions in the sixteenth century. Since the earliest surviving manuscripts of *De mirabilibus mundi* date from the late-thirteenth century (and were therefore written at a time either contemporary with *Albertus* or soon after his death), however, *Nicholas of Poland* would have been one of the earliest medieval thinkers to be influenced by it.

The author of *De mirabilibus mundi* argued that the "marvels" of the world are in fact natural and caused by the "rational virtues" in things, even though these causes may be hidden from the intellect. In doing so, he was following an approach to occult qualities that by the thirteenth century had become fairly common in scholastic circles.⁵⁸ As *M.-D. Chenu* has pointed out, the "desacralizing of nature," which placed severe limitations on the province of preternatural phenomena, was well underway in the twelfth century: "Criticism of the preternatural, whether in nature or in everyday life, continued to grow from this point on despite the permanent attraction that the marvelous held for men."⁵⁹ Although certain qualities in nature may be insensible or idiosyncratic, many scholastics argued, it is nevertheless possible to find rational explanations for them – unless, of course, they were caused by demons.⁶⁰ By the fourteenth century, *Nicole Oresme* (d. 1382) could devote an entire quodlibetal treatise, *De causis mirabilium*, to the subject of marvels and their causes, arguing that remarkable events do not require supernatural causes to explain them.⁶¹ *Oresme* advanced detailed arguments to prove that events regarded as marvelous proceed instead from natural causes that are overlooked, or from perceptual errors. Once the causes are known, such phenomena are no longer marvelous; and if they are the results of perceptual errors, they are merely illusions. "The work of the wise man is to make marvels cease," wrote the author of *De mirabilibus mundi* – that is, to search for an understanding of their causes. Yet like most

⁵⁶ *Lynn Thorndike*: *History of Magic and Experimental Science*, vol. 2. New York 1923; *idem*: *Further Consideration of the Experimenta, Speculum astronomiae, and De secretis mulierum* Ascribed to Albertus Magnus. *Speculum* (1955), 413–33; *William Eamon*: *Books of Secrets in Medieval and Early Modern Science*, *Sudhoffs Archiv* 69 (1985), 24–49.

⁵⁷ *Thorndike* (1923: note 47), p. 730.

⁵⁸ *Bert Hansen*: *Nicole Oresme and the Marvels of Nature: A Study of His De causis mirabilium with Critical Edition, Translation, and Commentary*, Toronto 1985 (= *Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, Studies and Texts*, 68), pp. 54–61.

⁵⁹ *M.-D. Chenu*: *Nature, Man, and Society in the Twelfth Century: Essays on New Theological Perspectives in the Latin West*, selected and translated by *J. Taylor* and *L. K. Little*, Chicago 1968, p. 14; *Tina Stieffel*: *The Heresy of Science: A Twelfth-Century Conceptual Revolution*. *Isis* 58 (1977), 347–62; *John E. Murdoch*: *From Social into Intellectual Factors: An Aspect of the Unitary Character of Late Medieval Science*, in: *The Cultural Context of Medieval Learning*, ed. *J. E. Murdoch* and *E. Sylla* (= *Boston Studies in the philosophy of Science*, 26), pp. 271–348.

⁶⁰ *Joseph B. McAllister*: *The Letter of Saint Thomas Aquinas 'De Occultis operibus naturae ad quemdam militem ultramontanum'*, Washington 1939 (= *The Catholic University of America Philosophical Studies*, 42); *Roger Bacon*: *Secretum secretorum cum glossis et notulis*, in: *Opera hactenus inedita Rogeri Baconi*, fasc. V. Oxford 1920.

⁶¹ *Hansen* (note 51).

writers on marvels and the occult, this author eventually conceded that for some marvelous events no account can be given. In such instances, we must rely on experience alone to confirm their existence. Referring to the magnet, which by this time was the standard example of the influence of occult qualities, he wrote:

For although we do not know a manifest reason why the loadstone attracts iron, nevertheless experience manifests it, so that no one should deny it. And just as this is marvelous and made certain only by experience, so likewise should man suppose in other things. And he should not deny any marvelous thing because he lacks a reason for it, but he should try it out (*experiri*); for the causes of marvelous things are hidden, and follow from such diverse causes preceding them, that man's understanding, as Plato says, cannot apprehend them. . . . Thus marvelous things are declared by the philosophers to be in things by experience (*per experientiam*), which no one ought to deny until it is tried out (*experiti*), according to the fashion of the philosophers who discovered it.⁶²

Although this academic strained himself to explain marvels, unwilling to relinquish his conviction that nature was rational, his commentary underscored the ambiguity of the scholastic resolution of the problem to occult qualities.

The influence of *pseudo-Albertus's De mirabilibus mundi* is manifest in *Nicholas of Poland's* medical writings. In the *Liber aggregationis*, *Nicholas* found dozens of examples of the effects "occult qualities" that were not reducible to the categories scholastic *scientia*. *Pseudo-Albertus's* concept of celestial influences on terrestrial objects, and his stress on experience over reason in dealing with occult qualities, are reflected throughout *Nicholas's* medical writings. And like *pseudo-Albertus*, *Nicholas* believed in the efficacy of magic rings and amulets to heal certain diseases.⁶³ Moreover *Nicholas*, following the general discussion of *De mirabilibus mundi*, used magnetism as a model to illustrate the influence of heavenly virtues on terrestrial objects.⁶⁴ "The sublime virtue," he wrote, echoing the views of *pseudo-Albertus*, "which from above flows below, from the heavens descending to assist, marries and unites with the elements, buries itself in things, and remains occult."⁶⁵ *Nicholas of Poland's Antipocras*, written around 1270, was thus one of the earliest medieval texts to bear the imprint of *pseudo-Albertus's* ideas. Yet it also illustrates the extremes to which, in the hands of a radically antischolastic thinker, speculations about "marvels" and "empiricism" could be carried. For *Nicholas* interpreted every pseudo-Albertine idea according to his own unique theory that "God loves common things": celestial virtues are not merely hidden in matter, but in the most vile and common material things; the people, who are closer to nature, know more than the philosophers; experience bears greater truth than reason; the meek inherit the earth; less is definitely more. Unlike the *pseudo-Albertus*, *Nicholas* attempted not to rationalize marvels and bring them under the cloak of *scientia*, but to preserve them as a separate domain, distinct from *scientia*. Thus according to *Nicholas* an *empiricum* (i. e., an "empirical" remedy or phenomena) was an object "whose innate virtue is such that, by pouring itself out from afar, is itself not subjected to diminishment."⁶⁶ For *Nicholas of Poland*, an "empirical" virtue

⁶² *Liber secretorum Alberti magni de virtutibus herbarum et animalium quorundam eiusdemque liber de mirabilibus mundi et etiam de quibusdam effectibus causatis a quibusdam animalibus etc.* Venice 1509, fols. 10v-11.

⁶³ See *Antipocras*, ed. Ganzyniec (note 4), pp. 66-70.

⁶⁴ Cf., e.g., *ibid.*, pp. 50, 48, 58.

⁶⁵ "Virtus sublimis, que desuper influit imis, a firmamento condescendens, elemento nubit et unitur simul, in re cum sepelitur et manet occulta", *ibid.*, p. 58, v. 212-15.

⁶⁶ "Dicitur empiricum, cui virtus insita sic, cum se procul effundit, nec se minus inde refundit subiecto proprio", *ibid.*, p. 50, v. 87-89.

was not merely one that is known by experience (or intuition), but was by its very nature marvelous.

Nicholas of Poland's critique of the medical establishment, grounded upon his radically empiricist outlook, was not an isolated phenomenon, confined to culturally backward Silesia. His excessive stress on the authority of experience and his critique of scholastic medicine were symptomatic of anti-intellectual and anti-authoritarian tendencies that surfaced in late-medieval cultural life. For many intellectuals of the late-Middle Ages, the limits of reason had been reached. Only a few generations after *Nicholas* wrote his polemics, a reaction against the scholastic program developed within the universities, particularly in the philosophy of nominalism, whose proponents refuted the claim that the general categories of thought used in scientific explanations are real. Indeed, the nominalists asserted that all mental conceptions are only convenient ways of ordering sense experience. Ultimately, they argued, all we know about the world are our perceptions of it. The "nominalist-realist" debate of the fourteenth century was symptomatic of a crisis in medieval thought, for the intention of the nominalist critique was to refute what seemed, to many thinkers, to be dangerous implications of scholastic philosophy: by making the world rational, purging it of miracles, the scholastics had inevitably reduced the scope of God's power in the world. The nominalists, by challenging the reality of universals, attempted to put God back into the world; and as a consequence of their radical critique of reason, they asserted the primacy of experience over theory, of faith and intuition over rational understanding.⁶⁷

Nicholas of Poland, as far as we know, was no nominalist. He lived too early to take part in the contentious debates of the fourteenth century, and in any case would probably have seen them as just another instance of the obscurantism of philosophy. Yet his critique of scholastic medicine was symptomatic of the growing dissatisfaction, on essentially religious grounds, with the aggressive movement by scholastic philosophy to limit God's almighty power in the universe. For *Nicholas*, the world was full of marvels that human reason could never hope to explain, any more than man's feeble intellect could explain the ultimate mystery of God's creation. Marvels are known only by direct experience, just as the heart alone, by intuition, knows God's presence. It even seemed to *Nicholas*, as perhaps to many others, that God's miracles are revealed more often to simple and humble folk than to physicians, philosophers, and theologians, whose learning may blind them to the deepest truths of religion and nature.

APPENDIX

Nothing can be documented with certainty about *Nicholas of Poland* after the notice by *Traski*. Polish archives, however, contain a number of notices, dating from 1271 to 1316, relating to a certain *Nicholas* identified as *magister* and *medicus*, who served as court physician and counselor to several of the nobility of Lesser Poland. Is it possible that these notices refer

⁶⁷ *Edward Grant*: *The Condemnation of 1277, God's Absolute Power, and Physical Thought in the Late Middle Ages*, *Viator* 10 (1979), 211-44. There is a vast literature on nominalism, much of it generated only within the last few decades, when the meaning of the term has undergone considerable revision from its traditional usage. For a summary of the modern debate over nominalism, see *William J. Courtnay*: *Nominalism and Late Medieval Religion*, in: *The Pursuit of Holiness in Late Medieval and Renaissance Religion*, ed. *Charles Trinkaus* and *Heiko Oberman*, Leiden 1974, pp. 26-59. In addition, see *Heiko A. Oberman*: *Some Notes on the Theology of Nominalism with Attention to its Relation to the Renaissance*, *Harvard Theological Review* 53 (1960), 47-76; *idem*: *The Harvest of Medieval Theology*, Cambridge, Mass. 1963.

to our *Nicholas*? If so, they raise the intriguing possibility of a second and hitherto unnoticed career of *Nicholas of Poland*, shedding new light on his intellectual development and suggesting a more far-reaching impact of his ideas than has so far been noticed.

These documents were first brought to light by *Andrzej Skulimowski*, who did not identify them with our *Nicholas of Poland*, but who nevertheless pointed out that they must refer to a physician who was educated outside of Poland.⁶⁸ Before 1348, when the University of Prague was founded, there was nowhere in eastern Europe where a person could go to earn the titles of *magister* or *physicus*. The first Polish university was founded at Cracow in 1364; and only in the beginning of the fourteenth century were students able to study medicine at the hospital school of the Church of the Holy Cross in Cracow. This *Nicholas*, therefore, had to have earned his degrees at one of the western European universities.

The earliest document, dated 8 September 1271, refers to "magistro Nico'ao physico" as being present as a witness to the signing of an official document in the court of *Bolesław Pobożnego* (Bolesław V, the Chaste).⁶⁹ In a document of 1275, a "Nicholaus medicus" appears at the court of *Władysław Łokietek*, *Leszek the Black's* brother and Duke of Breść Kujawski.⁷⁰ In 1295, and again in 1297, the same *Nicholas* is mentioned as court physician to *Przemysław II*, the ambitious and powerful Duke of Greater Poland.⁷¹ In 1309, he appears as court physician to *Henry IV* (Pobus) of Silesia.⁷² Other documents (dated 1304 and 1306) refer to *Nicholas* as an advisor to the Palatins (*Pfalzgrafen*) of Kalisch, *Michael* ("magister Nicolaus medicus, professor arti medicinae") and *Nicholas*.

The last document in which *Nicholas* is mentioned, dated 18 April 1316, is the most interesting, as it provides much fuller documentation about this *Nicholas*.⁷³ It is a privilege by *Władysław Łokietek*, now duke of Krakow, Sandomierz, Sieradz, Łęczyca, and Kujawy, granting *Nicholas*, his court physician, ownership of the villages of Sweczke and Daszewicze, and confirming his ownership of the village of Benkowa, which *Nicholas* had purchased earlier for the sum of 50 marks. The privilege granted *Nicholas* complete juridical and economic rights to the villages, and made the terms of his feudal jurisdiction over them hereditary in *Nicholas's* family.⁷⁴ Furthermore, the privilege extolls *Nicholas* as an "honorable man and famous master of medicine" who had rendered important services to *Władysław* during the "great depopulation and impious devastation of the city of Posen" — a reference to the terrible Mongol invasions of Poland in the thirteenth century.

⁶⁸ *Andrzej Skulimowski* and *Mieczysław Skulimowski*: *Magister Mikołaj – nadworny lekarz książąt wielkopolskich w drugiej połowie XIII i początku XIV w.*, *Archiwum Historii Medycyny* 21 (1958), 285–90. See also note 75.

⁶⁹ *Codex diplomaticus Majoris Poloniae*, Posen 1878, tomus I, Nr. 614; *Skulimowski* and *Skulimowski* (note 68), 285.

⁷⁰ *Codex diplomaticus Poloniae*, ed. *L. Rzysszczewski* and *A. Muczkowski*, vol. I, Warsaw 1847, Nr. 56. *Władysław* succeeded *Leszek* as Duke of Sieradz in 1288.

⁷¹ *Codex diplomaticus Majoris Poloniae*, II, Nr. 720: "magistro Nicolao, medico nostro", *ibid*, IV, 2058.

⁷² *Codex diplomaticus Majoris Poloniae*, II, Nr. 926.

⁷³ *Ibid*, Nr. 982; *Andrzej Skulimowski*: *Najstarszy przywilej królewski wydany dla polskiego lejarza*, *Polski Tygodnik Lekarski* 13 (1958), 1895–96.

⁷⁴ Such charters were fairly common in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, when the Polish kings encouraged German settlement and the establishment of German law in Lesser Poland. The fact that this charter contains the usual formula, "locare iure Theuthonico", suggests that the *Nicholas* in question was probably a German, although by this time Polish settlers were also granted such charters; see: *The Cambridge History of Poland* (note 9), pp. 125–40.

Skulimowski argues persuasively that these documents all refer to the same *Nicholas*, and that he was obviously a man whose services as a physician, scholar, and advisor were considered valuable to the dukes of Lesser Poland.⁷⁵ But do they refer to our “Friar Nicholas” of Cracow? On the face of it, the prospect seems unlikely, for several reasons. First, there is no mention in the documents noted by *Skulimowski* of this *Nicholas* being a Dominican friar. Moreover, if the last document, dated 1316, refers to our Nicholas, it would mean that he lived into his eighties, which seems far too old to be still serving as a court chancellor and physician – unless, of course, *Władisław* was simply rewarding a deserving servant at the end of a long and distinguished career. And finally, it seems improbable that a man who advocated medical practices as unorthodox as those of Friar *Nicholas*, a man who urged people to eat snakes, toads, and scorpions, would have earned such a respected place at court.

None of these objections, of course, absolutely rule out the two Nicholases as being one in the same. After all, *Nicholas* may have left the Dominican order to pursue a more rewarding secular career at court; the privilege by *Władisław* does, in fact, suggest that the man whom the duke rewarded had rendered valuable service during the period of the Mongol invasions; and Friar *Nicholas's* medical views, however unorthodox, did gain the approbation of *Leszek the Black*. We do not argue that the documents all refer to the same *Nicholas*, but we do suggest that the evidence warrants further investigation by other scholars more familiar with Polish archives than we. For if the documents are about one *Nicholas* and not two, our own, hypothetical reconstruction of the life of *Nicholas of Poland* would have to be revised. Moreover, these documents would sketch the career of a remarkable practitioner who, in spite of his unconventional medical views and his extreme anti-scholastic attitudes, managed to gain a respected place in the highest reaches of Polish society. Additional research, whether it confirms or disproves this hypothesis, would shed important new light not only on the author of the *Antipocras*, but also on the development of the medical college at Montpellier and on medicine in the Polish and Silesian courts.

Zusammenfassung

In seinem um 1270 verfaßten ‘*Antipocras*’ (“Gegen-Hippokrates”), einer Kampfschrift in eleganten leonischen Versen, greift der Dominikaner-Bruder *Nikolaus von Polen* (“Niklas von Mumpelier”) in ätzenden Ausfällen die scholastische Medizin an, wobei er ihr vorwirft, daß der Akademikerarzt (*physicus*) das eigentliche Ziel der Heilkunde aus den Augen verloren habe, weil er zu stark auf die Theorie fixiert sei. Da sich die Angriffe von Nikolaus ausdrücklich gegen die medizinische Tradition von Montpellier richten, wo Nikolaus zwanzig Jahre weilte, wirft der ‘*Antipocras*’ neues Licht auf den Beginn gegenläufiger Bewegungen, die sich von der okzitanischen Hochschule und ihrer wissenschaftlichen Entwicklung absetzten. Es mag sein, daß Nikolaus manche seiner Vorstellungen in der Auseinandersetzung mit der Frühphase der akademischen Dispute um die Heilwirkungen (“*virtutes*”) des Theriaks gewonnen hat, doch ist der Inhalt seines Argumentierens mehr religiös bzw. philosophisch-spekulativ untermauert: Nicht anders als die Nominalisten des 14. Jhs. lehnt der schlesisch-polnische Predigermonch es ab, entsprechend scholastischen Versuchen die Macht Gottes im Weltall zu begrenzen. Er glaubt, daß Gott die am meisten “wunderbaren” Heilwirkungen den geringsten und verachtetsten Dingen eingeflößt habe und daß diese “empirischen” *Virtutes*

⁷⁵ *Skulimowski* and *Skulimowski* (note 68), p. 288.

nur der Erfahrung und nicht der rationalen Erkenntnis zugänglich seien. Von dieser im wesentlichen religiösen Sichtweise hat Nikolaus das wichtigste seiner erfahrungsheilkundlichen Arzneimittel, nämlich Schlangenfleisch, abgeleitet, das er in einer ersten naturheilkundlichen Volksbewegung seinen Anhängern und Patienten in Oberschlesien und Polen (Krakau) zu essen gab⁷⁶.

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