

Puritan Medicine in Colonial New England: Decoding a Mystical Marvel

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Introduction

From the Salem Witch Trials to *The Scarlet Letter*, the colonial Puritans have cemented a recognizable image in modern minds. Typically, most remember the Puritans as religious fanatics—shunning progress in favor of divine purification. Consequently, mainstream knowledge holds little about their attitudes toward health and disease. Yet this fixed perspective does the scholars and religious intellectuals of this group a vast disservice as analyzing this topic reveals an array of complex doctrinal debates. Notably, two opposing paradigms are littered throughout these medical texts:

- Ancient Greek physician Galen
- German Swiss alchemist Paracelsus

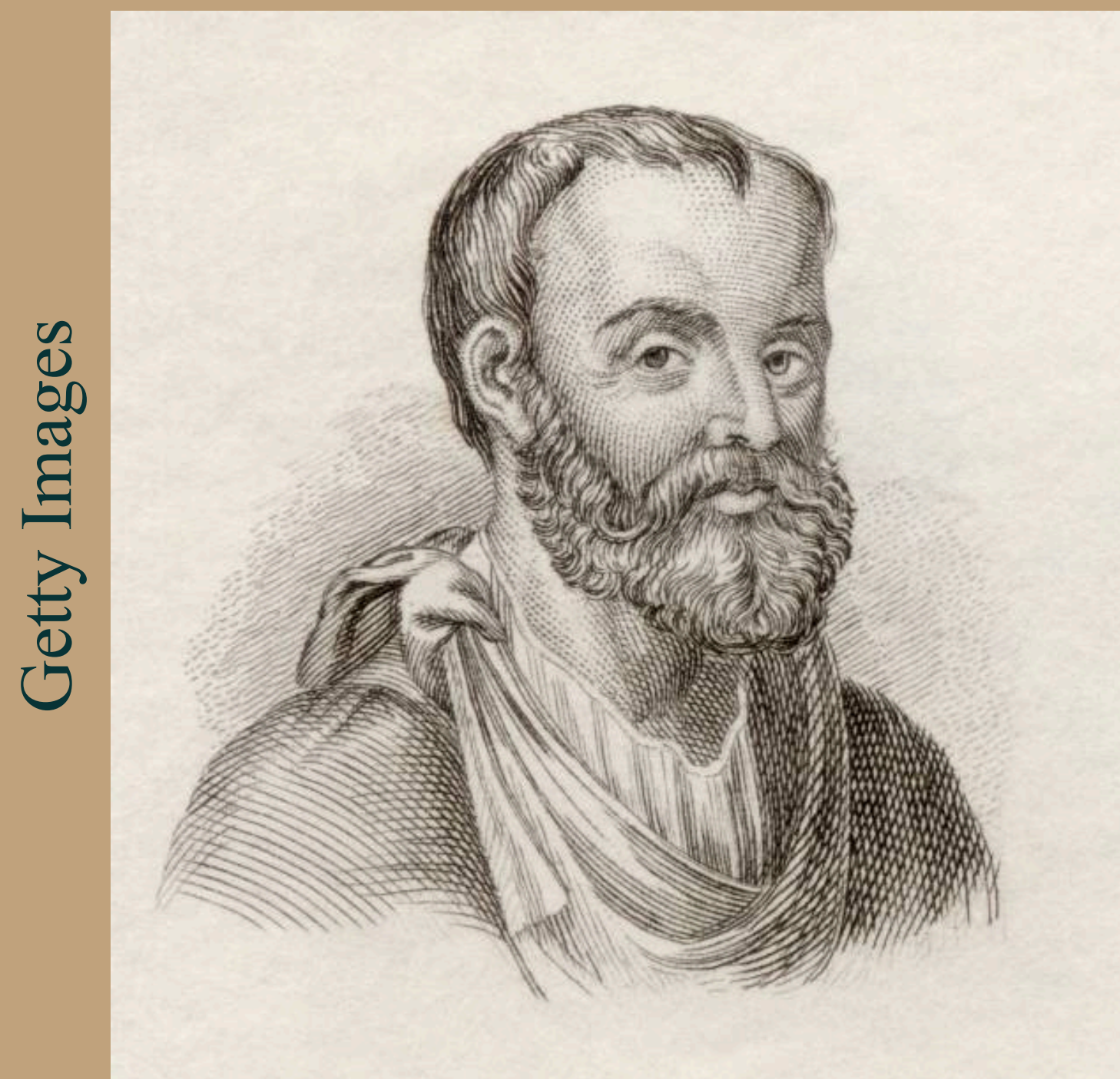
However, the significance of these antique influences is largely absent from modern historical discourse. Thus, through a Galenic and Paracelsian lens, this project seeks to understand how the New England Puritans cultivated their knowledge of public health and how they deemed it would be best preserved.

Methodology

In order to analyze the influences of Galen and Paracelsus in the works of early Puritan medicinal and political figures, I conducted a preliminary analysis on secondary sources belonging to various special collections and historical societies of New England, such as the Colonial Society of Massachusetts and Alberty and Shirely Smalls Special Collection Library, to gain a greater insight into popular restorative treatments, such as:

- botanical remedies
- occasional cannibalistic approaches

Subsequently, I focused upon the medical treatises of leading Puritan physicians from the 1630s to the 1820s. I utilized contextual analysis to identify practices that were inspired by or attributed to either Galen or Paracelsus in the texts.



Claudius Galen



Paracelsus

Two Doctrines, as explained through herbs:

Galen: Four Humors



Digitalis purpurea, or foxglove plant
 Rembert Dodoens' Herbal (1578)
 Boston Medical Library

Paracelsus: Like-Cures-Like



Scorpion-like herb: Phytognomonica
 Boston Medical Library (1650)

Results

Most physicians appeared to be influenced by both Galen and Paracelsus, while some reject the former's teachings entirely. This trend is depicted by the preference chart below:

Puritan Physicians & Their Influences		
Galen	Paracelsus	Both
	Edward Taylor	Edward Stafford
	John Woodall	Nicholas Culpeper
		Cotton Mathers

Findings

- After a detailed analysis of the written medical works of five of the dominant Puritan physicians of the 17th to 19th centuries, it is evident that while certain men adopted staunch beliefs in favor of Paracelsus, the majority adapted the approaches from both minds.
- Findings reflects historical chronology as Galen's Ancient Greek approach was largely becoming obsolete. Paracelsus, meanwhile, was seen as a beacon of scientific reform. In fact, his epithet was the Luther of Medicine---indeed, a name quite fitting for the Puritans.

Discussion

- Uniquely demonstrates the educational fortitude of this deeply religious group
 - Many physicians' medical views were influenced by their faith
- Clear reliance on botanical remedies
 - Well-recorded in scientific treatises

Limitations

- Difficult to separate the Puritans who practiced medicine in New England and those who were born and stayed in Great Britain
- Physicians may not always explicitly cite Galen or Paracelsus as being the origin of their knowledge on a particular subject

Next Steps

- Identify additional physicians to group into the above chart
- Chronologically track when Paracelsus' influence became less significant

References

