CHAPTER 3

POPULIST WRITING ON DISEASES IN THE LATE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

INTRODUCTION

One of the most opportunistic journalists of the Interregnum, Marchamont Nedham (or Needham) discussed the idea that microscopic animalcules might cause disease in an idiosyncratic work entitled Medela Medicinae: A Plea for the Free Profession, and a Renovation of the Art of Physick Out of the Noblest and most Authentick Writers (1665). This combined Nedham’s own medical theories with Helmontian chemistry and a theory of living disease agents.

Weighing in at 516 pages, this was no mere pamphlet but an extended attack on “gentleman-physicians,” the Galenic and Scholastic medicine they practiced, and the system of authority, laws, and traditions that conferred upon them the exclusive right to practice physic. The long title aptly describes the author’s goals for physic: “shewing The Public Advantage of its Liberty, The Disadvantage . . . to the Publick by . . . Physicians,’ imposing upon the Studies and Practice of others, the Alteration of Diseases from their old State . . . the Causes of that Alteration, [and] the Insufficiency and Uselessness of meer Scholastic Methods and Medicines, with a necessity of New.” Nedham called for social, professional, ideological, scientific, and medical reformation, “tending to the Rescue of Mankind from the Tyranny of Diseases; and of Physicians themselves, from the Pedantism of old Authors and present Dictators.” Despite its heft, the book was intended for an audience of lay readers, not professional colleagues. Nedham explains and discusses medical terms such as “contagion,” includes a thorough history of the concept, translates his Latin quotations and terms, and sometimes addresses the reader directly.

Nedham’s work attracted several rebuttals that further illuminate the relationships among Helmontian disease theory, contagionism, and ideas of
The themes also appeared in other populist Helmontian works published during the Restoration, with other disease theories. It is possible that some of them reflect pre-existing lay theories, but our dependence on printed medical works makes it difficult to reconstruct a detailed and comprehensive picture of what ordinary Englishmen thought about the cause and nature of disease during this period. Even if these works did not reflect lay medical ideas, they surely contributed to shaping those ideas.

**A Theory of Living Pathogens: Marchamont Nedham (1620–1678)**

A graduate of All Souls’ College, Oxford, Nedham became the editor of a Parliamentary newspaper in 1643 but soon sided with the Independents. Forbidden by Parliament to publish, he turned to medicine in 1646. After supporting Charles I from 1647 until the King’s execution in 1649, he worked for Cromwell and brought out a newspaper, the *Mercurius Politicus*, under the supervision of John Milton. It was during this period of close collaboration with Milton in 1650–1651 that Nedham wrote *The Excellencie of a Free State*: a work described as the “first sustained example of republican democracy in classical and Machiavellian terms . . . ”

There are echoes of *Areopagitica* (1644), Milton’s denunciation of press licensing, in the first chapter of the *Medela*, which argues that many great physicians have been unjustly censured by authorities.

Nedham’s frequent and brazen changes of allegiance defy efforts to discern consistent political principles or loyalties. For four years during the Interregnum, he spied for the government on the Fifth Monarchists and other radical groups while practicing chemical medicine. At the Restoration, he fled to Holland to avoid Royalists who maintained that the “restoration would be incomplete unless he were hanged.” After buying a pardon, he returned to London, where he resumed both medical practice and journalism for hire. He was paid by Charles II to write against Shaftesbury and even supported the ejection of Dissenting schoolmasters. His medical views remained unorthodox: he joined the effort to establish a “Society of Chymical Physicians” in opposition to the monopoly of the London College of Physicians.

The *Medela* asserted that the nature of diseases had changed since classical times, making Galenic remedies outdated. Syphilis in particular had gradually changed its character, becoming hereditary and transmissible by asexual contagion. Scurvy had also changed, growing more dangerous, becoming hereditary, and causing many deaths that were attributed to other diseases. Together, syphilis and scurvy were altering the “whole Frame of Nature in Mankind, and all the diseases thereto belonging.”

Nedham pointed out that deaths from scurvy listed in London Bills of Mortality had increased from 5 in 1630 to 103 in 1656. Even this understated the true mortality rate because physicians misdiagnosed many scurbitic diseases. Rickets had shown a similar transformation, increasing from 12 deaths in 1630 to 521 in 1660.