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Introduction: Medicine for the Sick Soul

In the dedication to his praise of an ass, *Laus asini*, Dutch humanist Daniel Heinsius (1580–1655) censured social evils and the world’s sick condition in medical terms. His dedication was addressed to Ewald Schrevel, a professor of medicine at Leiden, whose expert opinion of the current age Heinsius sought: “Touch it and feel its pulse, will you? I’ll bet that you’ll agree with Democritus, saying that ‘this is no longer mere error, this is disease’.” (1629b, p. 2.) As signs of the morbid condition of the contemporary world, Heinsius mentioned inverted values. Contempt was shown towards the virtuous and the learned, and everything that was noble or worthy of eternal fame was treated with disgust. Geniuses and salutary authors of the ilk of Hippocrates, Galen, Aristotle, Plutarch and Cicero were abhorred and treated as if they were mere waste products. In Heinsius’s view, in his day everybody was merely chasing the shadow of an ass.²

Heinsius’s rhetoric of universal sickness and the wrong notions of the multitude reflected a conventional humanistic set of values in his insistence on knowing ancient authors and complaining about the present barbaric state of higher education. Pathological terms were frequently used in this connection by humanists to describe the decline of classical learning or the decay of the world in general (cf. Kühlmann 1982, pp. 67–112). But what is more important here is that Heinsius’s medical rhetoric, using terms of universal pathology, also summarised the view that satirists have often held of a society and its inhabitants. In interpreting its evils in pathological terms, diagnosing vices as diseases and describing the ubiquity of madness, authors of satires have frequently applied medical imagery in their art of moral castigation. Significantly, Heinsius’s list of neglected authorities also included
ancient philosophers and medical authors, who will have an important role in illustrating the medical analogies in this study.

The medical analogy between vices and physical diseases is an important tool with which to analyse the nature and functioning of satire. Throughout history, satirists have employed images of bodily weakness and diseases as indices of the human condition. Human beings have been represented as ailing patients suffering from physical illnesses that were analogies for mental and moral defects needing improvement and medical care. The sources of illnesses were usually found in questionable living habits. Among the Roman satirists, Lucilius (c. 180–102 BC) had already declared that “We see him who is sick in mind showing the mark of it on his body” (26, frg. 678; trans. E. H. Warmington). Horace (65–8 BC) playfully argued – echoing the Stoics – that hardly anyone was deemed sane or healthy, since the world of satire was crowded with sick people (Sermones 2.3.32). Humanity’s sick condition was specified as the reason for writing satires. Horace stated that vices were so common that anyone picked at random from a crowd was probably plagued with either avarice or some disease of ambition (Sermones 1.4.25–6). Even the impulse to write was considered a disease: Juvenal referred to writer’s itch (scribendi cacoethes) as a sick obsession (7.52). At the end of his tenth satire, Juvenal added his famous plea, which might serve as a motto for all Roman satire, namely, the best one can ask for is “a sound mind in a sound body” (10.356).

In Renaissance and later Narrenliteratur, such as Johann Beer’s Narrenspital (1681), foolishness was often depicted as a cancerous tumour, which insidiously overcomes ever more victims and is cured only with difficulty. It has been suggested that in the seventeenth century, art in general abandoned the demand for realistic imitation and had emphatic recourse to analogies, metaphors, hyperboles and paradoxes. One expression of this changing aesthetic atmosphere was seen in the increased attention given to medical themes and images in literature and in the adoption of medical or physiological titles for books, such as Thomas Nashe’s Anatomy of Absurditie (1589), John Donne’s Anatomy of the World (1611) or the anonymous anatomy of a conscience, Anatome joco-seria conscientiae (1664). This fashion coincided with the development of scientific anatomical knowledge, which drew attention to the hidden structures of the human being; early modern anatomies were sometimes ostensibly moral works and employed the anatomy as an aggressive critical method to study vices (Hodges 1985, p. 6). At the beginning of Anatome joco-seria conscientiae (pp. 3–4), the author apologised to doctors for intruding on their field by examining an anatomical issue, but his intention was to