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Magic, Mysticism, and Modern Medicine: the Influence of Alchemy in Seventeenth-Century England

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Poster Presentation P18

MAGIC, MYSTICISM, AND MODERN MEDICINE: THE INFLUENCE OF ALCHEMY IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND

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In 1947, historian George Sarton questioned the place of alchemy in the history of science. He was not unlike many historians, who even attacked scholars of the subject, characterizing them as "fabulous creatures" who "seem to be under the wrath of God themselves" and who "become tinctured with the kind of lunacy they set out to describe." For decades, critics fought hard to keep alchemy out of the history of science. Instead, the emphasis of the Scientific Revolution centered on the mathematical sciences, focusing mainly on the intellectual move from Copernicus to Newton and highlighting astronomy and the studies of motion at the expense of the biological and chemical sciences. Moreover, many factors have led historians of science to underestimate the importance of alchemical and chemical philosophy in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe. Recent evidence, however, shows that alchemy was just as vital to the development of modern medical practices as was Galenic medicine, which is commonly seen as the precursor to modern medicine by historians of science.

Still, recent efforts by historians of science have focused more on continental alchemy and not enough on English alchemy. Allen Debus, a historian at the University of Chicago, is one of few scholars to examine alchemical medicine in seventeenth-century England; however, he fails to discuss some of the most startling advancements made by English alchemists during this era. Specifically, Debus does not discuss alchemical treatments of the plague and venereal diseases in the seventeenth century. This presentation, however, will concentrate on those treatments and show how alchemy was, despite its traditional characterization, quite modern in its medical philosophy because of these new techniques.