Consultants, Careerists and Conspirators: Royal Doctors in the Time of Richard III

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DURING THE LATER MIDDLE AGES, the practice of physic and surgery at the royal court or in the household of a great nobleman did not simply offer a lucrative career to those with talent and ambition, but could also provide a stepping-stone to higher things. Two eminent fifteenth-century crown servants, John Somerset, sometime 'master' or tutor to Henry VI and Chancellor of the Exchequer for over fourteen years, and William Hattecliffe, Edward IV's secretary, were both learned men who had read medicine at university and had first entered royal employment as physicians. Not all the medical advisors retained by the monarch earned (or even sought) such spectacular promotion, but most contrived to accumulate enviable rewards in the way of gifts, offices, grants of land and other profits of patronage. Conveniently forgetting the problems often encountered by the recipients of royal largesse when it actually came to collecting their money, contemporary satirists relished the image of the unprincipled leech preying upon the susceptibilities of his wealthy victims and sucking them dry:

Also some other ar callyd Phesicians good
Whiche utterly discyue the pacient
If he haue money than hath he his intent
And if the seke haue store ynough to pay
Than shall the cure be dryuen from day to day

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So laweyers and Phesicians thousandes do marre
And whan they no more can of theyr suers haue,
The playntyf beggyth, the seke is borne to graue.

The remarkable success of some practitioners inevitably aroused antagonism and jealousy, especially when, like James IV of Scotland's French physician and alchemist, John Damian, they regularly caroused and played dice with their royal masters. The poet, William Dunbar, whose wit was as sharp as any
scalpel, effectively demolished Damian's professional reputation in three short lines:

In pottingry he wrocht gryt pyne,
He mudreist mony in medecyne.
In leichcraft he was homicyd.4

Service at court had other drawbacks, not least because physicians and surgeons, like other placemen, were exposed to the daily cut and thrust of political life. Indeed, given their close proximity to the King and his family, they were particularly vulnerable to the dynastic conflicts of the late-fifteenth century. The perquisites, on the other hand, were sufficiently great to tempt many well-qualified and experienced specialists out of the universities or craft guilds into royal or aristocratic employment, where they enjoyed a highly privileged position while their success lasted.

Medical practitioners retained on a more or less permanent basis at court had always wielded considerable indirect influence as a result of their ready access to the king's ear and the king's purse, but over the years their formal status improved steadily as well. During the reign of Edward IV, the senior royal physician received the same wages as a squire of the body, and was allocated additional expenses for a yeoman assistant and two servants.5 At least one occupant of this post was, in fact, paid rather more than the standard fee of 7½d. to 1s. per diem, although since his first duty was to supervise his master's diet it may fairly be said that he deserved every penny. The task of 'councelyng or awnsweryng' the self-indulgent King Edward in his choice of food and drink must have been difficult at the best of times; and one of the royal apothecaries, John Clark, submitted some substantial bills for supplying aids for his overworked digestive system. Clark's claims for drugs and medicines made up on the instructions of the physician more than doubled between 1462 (£41) and 1464 (£87), and had reached the unusually high total of £283 by May 1475, probably because of preparations for the forthcoming expedition to France. Not all these expensive commodities were for the King's use, however: it is interesting to note that in 1482 Clark equipped a medicine chest at a cost of almost £14 containing 'cripp, alexandrines, botellis, electuary' and other necessities for the use of Richard of Gloucester in Scotland.6 Besides prescribing remedies for the whole court, the physician was also responsible for diagnosing cases of 'leper' or 'pestylence' in the household, and ensuring that the appropriate quarantine regulations were enforced. Since many royal physicians were in holy orders, and almost all had reaped the benefits of a long university education (sometimes abroad), they were permitted to rank in precedence along with the king's chaplains and above the household knights. The master (or serjeant) surgeon was not quite so elevated, but his financial position was exactly the same, and he too had a small staff of his own. He was, furthermore, free to take 'the old broken mete clothes and towelles perusyd in the ewry . . . to make playstyr for the seke', so long as he accounted for them to the controller.7 It looks very much as if the royal consultants worked on a rota system, ensuring that at least one physician and one surgeon were in attendance at all times. Some were even given accommodation in or near the palace of Westminster or in the City of London so that they could more easily be summoned in emergencies. Thus, for instance, the lodgings in the palace occupied in the 1460s
by Edward IV's surgeon, Richard Field, were later granted to his colleague, James Frise; and William Hattecliffe received a gift of property in the City parish of St. Michael, Wood Street.8

Given the state of contemporary medical knowledge, the victims of serious injury or disease generally had little chance of recovery at the hands of conventional practitioners (whose methods may, indeed, have hastened their demise), although it is clear that in certain cases a skilful surgeon could save life or prevent permanent disfigurement.9 Edward IV's early experience of warfare may have led him to take a particular interest in the Barbers' Company of London, which was incorporated in 1462, shortly after he mounted the throne, and to which both he and his brother, Gloucester, belonged as honorary members. Unlike the far smaller and more loosely organized fellowship of surgeons, the Company of Barber Surgeons attracted a large and enthusiastic membership (including Edward's two master surgeons, William Hobbes and Richard Elstie), drawn both by the prestige of royal patronage and the benefits offered by a more formal structure. King Edward's charter placed especial emphasis upon the need for proper training, the improvement of standards and the regulation of the craft: themes taken up again at the very end of his reign, in 1482, when a new set of ordinances was drawn up in an attempt to stamp out discord arising from laxity over the admission of too many apprentices and unqualified 'foreigners'.10 Although, in the event, Edward IV's invasion of France, in 1475, proved satisfactorily bloodless, the arrangements for the expedition show that he was ready to put the skills of his protégés in the new company to the test. As well as his two senior medical advisors, James Frise and William Hobbes, he recruited a team of twelve surgeons and barber surgeons (seven to be paid at 1s. per diem and five at 6d.) in the expectation of heavy casualties.11 In this he was following the tried and tested example of Henry V, whose eminent master surgeons, William Bradwardine and Thomas Morstede, headed a somewhat larger unit of twenty-one surgeons mobilized in 1415 for his first invasion of Normandy.12

By and large, Richard III was content to retain the services of his late brother's doctors, many of whom he had come personally to know and trust. Notable among them was the above-mentioned William Hobbes, a surgeon who, unusually, had also studied medicine at both Oxford and Cambridge. Hobbes had been a dedicated supporter of the House of York since the 1450s; and in 1462 Edward IV retained him formally as his surgeon with a grant of certain confiscated property in London worth £14 a year. To this was later added an annuity of 40 marks (1470), a gift of £40 'by way of reward' (1477), the keepership of the hospital of St. Mary Bethlem in London (1479), and other assorted marks of royal favour, including exemption from the 1473 Act of Resumption.13 Few, if any, professional demands can have been made upon him during the invasion of France in 1475, but the summons to active service came again seven years later, when Edward sent him north with a contingent of eight surgeons to join the army which Gloucester was then preparing to lead against the Scots.14 While by no means an unqualified success, the expedition provided Hobbes with yet another opportunity for advancement, and he clearly made a good impression on Duke Richard. Not long after becoming King, the latter appointed him as his chief physician and increased his annuity to £40, payable.
retrospectively from Easter 1483. Although he lived to see the triumph of Henry VII (who, not surprisingly, dispensed with his services), Hobbes remained an unrepentant Yorkist until the end. In his will of 1488, he instructed his executors to place a stone over his tomb, recording his long years of employment by Richard, Duke of York, and his sons, King Edward and King Richard, in which he still took great pride.

Hobbes’ colleague, the physician, James Frise, also boasted an impressive record of service at court, dating back to November 1461, when he received the first of many rewards from a grateful ruler. Like Hobbes, Frise benefited from the gift of valuable holdings in the City (no less than fifteen messuages near the Barbican and other dwellings, alone worth over £26 a year, previously occupied by Lancastrian sympathisers), which were all the more welcome in his case since he came originally from Frisia, and had no estates of his own in England. In common with other fashionable foreign practitioners before him, he was accorded letters of denization, which were confirmed by Richard III, along with his annuity of £40 and his life-tenancy of two houses, a tenement and a lodge next to the round tower in the palace of Westminster. English monarchs traditionally made provision for their consultants’ old age, and Frise was no exception, being promised a place among the pensioners at St. George’s Chapel, Windsor, while he was still quite young. His career illustrates graphically the extent to which a capable doctor could prosper through royal patronage, although it shows, too, how transitory such rewards could be. The advent of the Tudors brought all hopes of further preferment to an abrupt end, and he was deprived of both his fee and his property in London. A petition for restoration, successfully addressed to Henry VII’s first parliament by the former owner of some of these holdings, actually accused him of obtaining them “by inordinat. undewe and damnable meanes ayenst the lawes of God and nature”: in other words of exploiting his influence over King Edward to force those who were under threat of attainder to release their possessions to him “for drede of his indignation, and drede of dethe”. Perhaps in recognition of his standing in the profession, King Henry was, even so, prepared to allow Frise a less prestigious corrody at the Church of Holy Trinity, Aldgate, but he died within a few months of Hobbes, in 1488, and thus had no need of it.

The wheel of fortune turned in a different direction for another Yorkist physician, John Argentine, now chiefly remembered as Dominic Mancini’s informant about the young Edward V’s fears of imminent death during his last sojourn in the Tower. Aged about forty in 1483, he was probably engaged in response to a royal household ordinance of the previous decade, which laid down that the Prince of Wales should always be attended by a suitably experienced physician and surgeon. Throughout the later middle ages, the heir to the throne received expert medical care, as is evident from a sermon delivered by the great Dominican preacher, John Bromyard, a century or so earlier. Although often critical of the avarice and sharp-practice of the healing profession, he likened a successful preacher to “the physician to the royal household who must administer herbs and other necessaries, with all skill and firmness, to preserve the health of no less a distinguished patient than the King’s own son”. Argentine’s qualifications were certainly beyond question, since besides achieving distinction as a theologian at Cambridge (where he was senior
proctor in 1472), he is thought to have obtained his doctorate in medicine in Italy, which would, of course, explain how he became friendly with Mancini. His total obscurity for the rest of Richard III's reign admits a variety of possible interpretations, of which the least sinister seems quite simply to be a fall from favour as a result of his connexion with the Prince of Wales' household. At all events, Henry VII's victory at Bosworth saw his return to court as physician to Prince Arthur at a fee of £20 a year, and the tide of ecclesiastical preferment once again began to flow his way. One of his most impressive new appointments was that of provost of King's College, Cambridge, a suitable reward for a noted humanist whose collection of books included works on theology, astronomy, astrology and, needless to say, medicine. Argentine was, to a large extent, at the mercy of political events, caught in a web of intrigue not of his own making; but some of his associates in the medical profession played a willing and active part in the machinations of their employers, and, inevitably, had to face the consequences. One physician notable for his lack of judgement was Henry Sutton, the master of St. Nicholas's Hospital, Salisbury, and treasurer of the Cathedral, who was removed from office in 1495 because of his involvement with Sir William Stanley in the Perkin Warbeck conspiracy. Unlike some of the ringleaders, Sutton survived to die in his bed, four years later, but his career never quite recovered from this setback. The special relationship which then, as now, could develop between doctor and patient sometimes made it hard to avoid such complicity, as Lady Margaret Beaufort's chief physician found to his cost. 'This Margaret', Polydore Vergil tells us, 'for want of health usid thadvye of a physyion namyd Lewys [Caerleon], a Welshman born, who because he was a grave man and of no smaule experience, she was wont oftentimes to conferre frely with all, and with him famylyarly to lament her adversitee.' By a great stroke of luck, Caerleon also numbered Edward IV's widow, Queen Elizabeth, among his patients, and it was thus comparatively easy for him to visit her in sanctuary at Westminster in the summer of 1483 in order to broach Lady Margaret's plans for an alliance against the Usurper. Lewys, by and by, doing as he was commaundyd, made up the matter easily betwyxt the two women, who because of his scyence became a messenger betwene them, and was assocyat unto them in this new conspiracy against King Richard withont any suspyton. That he had a strong personal commitment to securing Richard's overthrow is evident, also, from his recommendation to Margaret of Christopher Urswyk as a possible agent for missions to her son, Henry of Richmond, in Brittany. Events moved too fast for the conspirators, however, and after the failure of the 1483 uprising Caerleon was thrown into the Tower and deprived of all his possessions. But his sacrifice was not forgotten, and once Henry ascended the throne his future prosperity was assured. By 1487 he was not only in receipt of annuities of 60 marks, but he also had the satisfaction of securing James Frise's old corrody at Windsor. Fittingly enough, Caerleon ended his days as a court physician, treating, among others, Henry VII's Queen, Elizabeth of York, whose marriage he had helped to negotiate so long before. He was still practising in about 1511, when Henry VIII assigned the singularly generous sum of £100 in gold to 'Master Lewes, the Princess of Castile's physician', by now at the pinnacle of his success as one of the most celebrated society doctors of his day.
It was all too easy for fashionable consultants to assume the rôle of councillor and confidant, especially if, like Caerleon, they also practised as astrologers. Medieval medical theory was strongly influenced by, and in many cases founded upon, the principles of astrology, so the two subjects were studied together in the universities. None the less, as C. A. J. Armstrong has already pointed out, the unsavoury association in the mind of late-fifteenth century governments between 'the occult and treason' made even the most reputable soothsayer liable to excite suspicion, not always without reason. Another victim of the reprisals following the unsuccessful rebellion of 1483 was Thomas Nandyke, 'nigromansier' and physician attendant on Henry, Duke of Buckingham, during the period leading up to his dramatic defection from King Richard. Whatever his medical skills, Nandyke had a limited future as a clairvoyant: he ought to have followed the example of Buckingham's more prudent councillors, who sensibly refused to take part in such a risky enterprise. Instead he suffered the fate of the other insurgents, being attainted of treason by the parliament of 1483. His sentence was reversed by Henry VII, although no more is heard of this enigmatic figure until his death in 1491. In common with his fellow conspirator, Lewis Caerleon, Nandyke had begun his career as a scholar at Cambridge; and it is worth noting that an inventory of his estate included books on 'exstranymy' as well as physic. Several interesting examples of the dual practice of medicine and astrology are to be found across the border in the court of James III of Scotland, an enthusiastic patron of natural science. Andrew Alaman (alias Andrews) initially made his name in the Low Countries, where his growing reputation as a soothsayer brought him to James' attention. Besides rewarding him with a substantial fee and an even more impressive allowance for robes, the latter also helped Alaman to secure a papal dispensation to hold at least two benefices — a type of reward frequently extended to practitioners in holy orders. The astrologer evidently possessed uncanny powers of prognostication, for he is said not only to have foretold the death in battle, in 1477, of Charles, Duke of Burgundy, but also James' own violent end at the hands of a baronial faction led by his son — a fate which his mercurial temperament and reliance upon unsuitable favourites made, in retrospect, all too predictable. King James' overt preference for the society of dabblers in the occult, such as his other physician, William Scheves (a graduate of Louvain and passionate bibliophile, whose appointment to the archbishopric of St. Andrews aroused violent opposition), did nothing to enhance his popularity, but it did benefit young men like Michael Ker, to whom he granted £85 'pro sua sustentacione ad scolas in partibus extramarinis pro medicinia studenda pro terminis trium annorum'. Although the most distinguished, Frise and Hobbes, were not the only medical specialists to show loyalty to Richard III during his short reign. Three other physicians, Thomas Bemmesley, Thomas Forestier (a Frenchman by birth) and Walter Lemster, also drew the standard fee of £40 as 'doctors of the King's body'. Lemster, in particular, seems to have done well for himself after leaving university in the 1460s with a doctorate in medicine. He was initially engaged by William Gray, Bishop of Ely, in about 1477 at 10 marks a year, payable for life. His fee was doubled shortly afterwards, but some trouble arose over the payment of the money (an experience encountered by most
practitioners), and in December 1483 Lemster used his position at court to obtain a strongly worded letter addressed by King Richard himself to the appropriate authorities. He evidently had more luck with Elizabeth, Duchess of Norfolk, who gave him a ruby ring, perhaps in thanks for a successful course of treatment, and who also agreed to act as his executrix. Yet although he died in 1487 with well over 500 marks in disposable income, almost as much again was still owing to him in unpaid fees. The contemporary practice whereby doctors contracted in advance to treat the sick in return for a specific sum of money or payment in kind was open to a whole variety of abuses, not least that of fraud on the part of the patient; and Lemster spent a good deal of time and hard cash on litigation for the recovery of such debts. He could, however, congratulate himself on his unusual good fortune in being kept on in the royal household by the newly crowned Henry VII, who confirmed him in office. Thomas Forestier also tried hard to win Henry's favour by dedicating to him a treatise on the plague which he completed in 1485, but he had to wait another three years before the issue of general letters of pardon brought about his rehabilitation.

Considerably less information has survived about King Richard's surgeons, possibly because they were engaged on a more _ad hoc_ basis than physicians. This had sometimes been the case in his brother's reign, when short-term contracts were drawn up in response to particular circumstances. Thus, for example, in 1464, a lump sum of £10 was paid to the otherwise unknown 'Master Gerard, surgeon', for attending 'by our special commandent certayn our men of our houshold and many othir late hurt in our werres in the north contree'. Two surgeons, Anthony Lupyane and John Smith, appear to have been employed regularly by Richard at court; and Lupyane actually received a gift of £5 a year for life from the Essex estates confiscated in 1483 from the rebel Duke of Buckingham. His colleague, John Smith, had been connected with the royal household from at least 1475, when he was retained at 1s. _per diem_ to accompany Edward IV to France, although his peacetime wages were rather lower. Even so, Richard III thought sufficiently highly of his 'well-beloved servant' to keep him about his person during the troubled aftermath of Buckingham's rebellion; and in December 1483 orders were issued for the prompt payment of his fee 'in consideration of his service and attendance upon us in all our last journey'.

Whereas Richard III could draw from the large pool of doctors and surgeons who had established their reputations in his brother's reign, recruiting one or two others as the need arose, Henry Tudor was naturally reluctant to entrust himself to the care of men whose loyalty seemed uncertain. His accession was marked by the removal of all but one of Richard's medical staff and the appointment of practitioners untainted by any connexion with the previous regime. Some, like Caerleon and Argentine, had already given proof of their reliability, as had Benedict Furtze, a physician whom Henry rewarded in November 1485 with a gift of £30, 'in consideration of the true and diligent service performed by him as well in parts beyond the sea as in this realm'. King Henry was by no means the first English monarch to welcome foreign doctors to court, although his penchant for Italian physicians and astrologers, as well as Englishmen trained in Italy, reflects the current interest in humanist thought. Notable among these new recruits was William Parron, a self-styled _phisicus et_
professor in astrologia from Piacenza, who left Henry's service under something of a cloud in 1503 after the funeral of Elizabeth of York, having but recently promised her another 40 years of active life. (With the benefit of hindsight, his optimistic prophesy that the young Prince Henry would enjoy a happy and fecund marriage seems equally wide of the mark.)33 Parron's successor, the Genoese physician, John Boarius, employed Erasmus as a tutor for his two sons, and was hailed by him as the leading astrologer of his day, although in this instance the King relied upon him chiefly for his medical rather than his occult skills. Henry's other consultants included a French surgeon, Jean Veyrier, and the Oxford trained physicians, William Lynch, John Chamber and Robert Sherborn, Bishop of Chichester (who, like William Hattecliffe, was really more of an administrator than a doctor), but none had the impact upon the medical profession of Thomas Linacre, one of the prime movers in the foundation, in 1518, of the Royal College of Physicians. Linacre travelled extensively in Italy during the last two decades of the fifteenth century, obtaining his M.D. at Padua in 1496, and establishing important connexions with leading scholars there. He returned to act first as tutor to Prince Arthur, then as physician to the King himself; and he brought with him a new approach to the study and practice of physic.34 His presence in Henry's medical entourage is in itself a reflection of changing attitudes in the profession, and also of new trends in the royal patronage which so many of the country's leading practitioners still found indispensable. Similar developments are also discernable in Scotland, where James IV himself led the vanguard in encouraging a more scientific approach to both medicine and surgery. He was, we are told, 'weill leirnit in the art of medicin and also ane cuning sorugenar that nane in his realme that wssit [followed] that craft bot wald tak his counsall in all proceidings'. Fortunately, perhaps, for the people of England, Henry VII showed none of his fellow monarch's enthusiasm for amateur dentistry and leechcraft, being generally more interested in the health of his subjects' cofferes than that of their persons.35

NOTES AND REFERENCES
1. I would like to thank Dr. Linda Clark, Miss Anne Sutton and Mr. R. P. Martin for their help in writing this article.


14. P.R.O. E405/70, m. 3.


19. Dominic Manconi, *The Unpurpotion of Richard III*, ed. C. A. J. Armstrong (Oxford 1969), pp.89, 93. According to this source, 'the physician Argentine, the last of his attendants whose services the King enjoyed, reported that the young King, like a victim prepared for sacrifice, sought remission of his sins by daily confession and penance, because he believed that death was facing him'.


34. For the most recent assessment of Linacre see *Linacre Studies: Essays on the Life and Works of Thomas Linacre* c. 1430-1524, ed. M. Pelling, F. Maddison and C. Webster (Oxford 1977).

35. Comrie, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, pp.148-57. In common with Peter the Great, James IV particularly enjoyed pulling teeth, I4s. being the standard compensation offered to those whose sufferings helped him to perfect his craft.