

"The Purple Island" of Phineas Fletcher: Allusions to the Anatomy of the Human Body in English Poetry up to the end of the Seventeenth century

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Summary

The Bible declared that *God created man in His own image*. The concept that this divine pattern occurred not only in Man (the Microcosm), but was eternally repeated throughout Creation in the Macrocosm (Universe) and the Geocosm (Earth), was the basis of the important Doctrine of Correspondences, in which similarities were sought between man and nature, (e.g. the comparable morphology of a human brain and a walnut). This article outlines the relevance of this concept in early herbal medicine. Contemporary poems describing correspondences to the anatomy of the human body are then examined, in particular *The Purple Island*, by Phineas Fletcher. The Reverend Phineas Fletcher (1582 - 1650) was an English metaphysical poet and *The Purple Island* (1633), his most famous work, was an epic poem describing the anatomy of the human body in allegorical terms. It is compared to an island, with veins and arteries as purple rivers flowing through the chief cities of *Liver, Heart and Bra/ne*. This has been acknowledged as one of the best and also one of the last great examples of the tradition of poetic correspondence in English literature.

Résumé

La Bible a proclamé que *Dieu créa l'homme à Son image*. Par la suite, ce concept fut à la base de la doctrine des Correspondances. Selon celle-ci, le modèle divin n'existe pas seulement chez l'homme (le microcosme), il se répète éternellement partout ailleurs, quand furent créés le macrocosme (l'Univers) et le géocosme (la terre). Un exemple de ces similitudes peut être donné en signalant les morphologies supposées comparables du cerveau humain et de la noix. Cet article souligne la pertinence d'un tel concept des correspondances dans les premiers traités de Médecine par les Plantes. Des poèmes de l'époque décrivant les correspondances avec l'anatomie du corps humain sont analysés: c'est le cas, en particulier, de *L Ile Pourpre* de Phineas Fletcher. Le révérend Phineas Fletcher (1582 — 1650) était un poète et un métaphysicien anglais et son plus célèbre ouvrage, *L Ile Pourpre* (1633) était un poème épique décrivant, en termes allégoriques, l'anatomie du corps humain. Le poète comparait ce corps humain à une île dans laquelle les rivières pourpres constituaient les veines et les artères coulant au travers des grandes villes représentées par le Foie, le Coeur et le Cerveau. *L'Ile Pourpre* est reconnue aujourd'hui non seulement comme le meilleur poème du genre, mais aussi comme l'un des derniers grands exemples d'une tradition poétiques des correspondances manifestée dans la littérature anglaise.

THE DOCTRINE OF CORRESPONDENCES

Before exploring English poetry up to and including the end of the seventeenth century, it is important to remember that there were fundamental differences in the way in which the educated Elizabethan perceived the world.

The Universe and everything in it was considered to be alive. Not only was everything animate, but all was interdependent on everything else. This of course was the basis of astrology, which had been so important in mediaeval thought. If everything was related and mutually dependent, then it was understandable that the movements of the stars in the outer spheres of the geocentric system might well influence men's affairs in the Earth at the centre.

It was also from this interdependency that the doctrine of correspondences was formed. Mediaeval scholars sought a key to explain this interdependence of man, the Universe and the Earth; something to bind them all together. They looked for similarities between everything that had been made by God. The Bible taught that *God created man in His own image: in the image of God created He him*¹.

They sought for evidence that this divine pattern occurred not only in Man himself (the Microcosm), but

was eternally repeated throughout Creation in the Macrocosm (Universe) and the Geocosm (Earth). The term, the *Universal Analogy*, is used to describe this basic correspondence between Man and the Universe and everything which had been created in it. Perhaps the best known example of all correspondences in the Universal Analogy is the ancient concept of tidal blood flow put forward by Empedocles, but often (wrongly) ascribed to Galen, that the blood ebbed and flowed in the blood vessels, just like the ocean tides, with which it corresponded! Both of course were dependent on the phases of the Moon.

A *signature* was an extension of the idea of correspondences. Sir Thomas Browne³ explained them thus:

*I hold moreover that there is a phytognomy, or physiognomy not only of Men, but of Plants and Vegetables, and in every one of them some outward figures, which hang as signs or Bushes of their inward forms. The Finger of God hath left an inscription on all his works*².

Henry More, (1614 - 1687)^b gives a good example of a signature in his *Antidote Against Atheism* when he tells us:

Wall-nuts bear the whole signature of the Head. The outward green cortex answers to the pericranium, and a salt made of it is singularly good for wounds in that part; as the

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*Kernel is good for the Brains, which it resembles*³.

More considers that God has put the signature of the skull and brain on the walnut shell and fruit to indicate that these parts of the nut would therefore be efficacious in head wounds. *Quinces*, continues More, *are a downy and hairy fruit; what more logical than a 'decoction of quinces' should prove good for the fetching again Hair that has fallen?* Scorpion grass, formed like the crooked tail of a scorpion, should likewise prove specific against the bites of poisonous insects; Adders tongue, and indeed all speckled plants with spots like the spotted skin of snakes, were antidotes for snake bite, and soothing in the case of stings.

Lungwort (*Pulmonaria*) was likewise thought to carry the signature of the lungs and to be useful in pulmonary disease. Heartsease (*Viola tricolor*) was presumed to be helpful in cardiac complaints. George Herbert¹ refers to botanical signatures in his poem, *Providence*, in which he lists herbal remedies, after first pointing out the corresponding horizontal plane between herbs themselves and man:

*Herbs gladly cure our fleshe because that they
Find their acquaintance there*⁴.

THE HOUSE OF ALMA

Edmund Spenser in 1589 describes a complex allegory of human anatomy in *The Faerie Queen* when he compares it to a Castle, the *House of Alma*. *Guyon* and *Arthur* are made very welcome in the house (which is symbolically obviously feminine). The Dining Hall is presided over by a steward called *Diet*, and a courteous welcoming marshal named *Appetite*. They visit the huge kitchen with its massive cauldron and cooling bellows (representing the liver and lungs). The *Maister cooke* named *Concoction* is aided by a *Kitchin clerke* called *Digestion*. We are even told of the allegorical anus, where all the material which was

*fowle (foul) and waste,
Not good or serviceable elles (else) for ought
They in another great rownde vessel plaste, (placed)
777/ by a conduit pipe it then was brought;
And all the reste, that noyous (unpleasant) was and
nought,
By secret wayes, that none might it espy,
Was close convoid, and to the backgate brought,
That cleped (named) was Port Esquiline, whereby
It was avoided quite and thrown out privily.*⁵

After visiting the "heart" where little Cupid played amongst a lovely bevy *offaire ladies*, they are taken up a flight of alabaster stairs to the head, which was illuminated by two beacons of living fire, which

*Were made, and set in silver sockets bright,
Cover 'd with lids deviz'd of substance sly,*

*That readily they shut and open might.*⁶

There are *divers rowmes* (rooms) in the head, but the three *chiefest* correspond to the higher mental faculties of imagination, reason and memory. The first chamber is vividly decorated with *sondry* (sundry) *colours*, fantasies and dreams, but drowned by the perpetual noise of buzzing flies, which are allegories of visions, prophesies and idle thoughts! A wise old man sits meditating in the second room, whose walls are covered by images from art and science, politics, law and philosophy. The chamber of Memory (*th' hindmost rowme of three*) is an untidy library full of old parchments, scrolls and books (some *all worme-eaten and full of canker holes*), where the librarian (*Eumnestes or Memory*) has an assistant (*Anamnestes or Forgetfulness*).

Two lesser-known poets, John Davies of Hereford and Robert Underwood also compare the body to buildings. Davies wrote in great anatomical detail in some of his poems (notably *Mirum in Modum*, 1602 and *Microcosmos*, 1603). Underwood wrote a poem called *The Little World* (1605) in which he describes the body as,

*A Cittie large of...a thousand houses.*⁷

Helkiah Crooke in 1615 wrote *Microcosmographia*, a prose work that appears to have been inspired by Spenser's *House of Alma*. Sawday has called the increasing interest by poets in anatomy and the interior of the human body an *autoptic view* (as in the word *autopsy*)⁸, and has argued that it is directly related to a more general public awareness of the body's form because of Vesalius's revolutionary work, *De humani corporis fabrica*, (1543) which, of course, was not based on unproven Galenic dogma, but on Vesalius's own meticulous observations on dissections of human cadavers meticulously performed by himself.

PHINEAS FLETCHER

The above correspondences are between the microcosm and architecture. In 1633, Phineas Fletcher wrote an epic poem in which he compared the human body to the Earth. He finds the most obscure *correspondences* and *signatures* in his poem *The Purple Island*, in which he racks his own imagination (and that of his reader) to explore analogies in the geocosm for almost every part of the body. Phineas Fletcher, (1582-1650), graduated MA from Cambridge in 1608 and, from 1621 lived the idyllic existence of a rural parson in the fens of Norfolk. Apart from his pastoral work, his two great loves in life were anatomy and angling. He was a friend of Izaak Walton, the author of the classic *The Compleat Angler*, who mentions Fletcher by name in his book. Fletcher's uncle, Richard Fletcher, was the Bishop of London, and Richard's son, (Phineas's cousin), was the celebrated playwright, John

Fletcher (the junior partner of Francis Beaumont)⁹. Phineas's brother, Giles, was also a poet.

Phineas was a staunch Royalist, but unlike many supporters of the King, he was fervently anti-Catholic, and his first published poem was a violently anti-Popish work, *Locustae vel Pietas Jesuitica*⁷ (1627), which was a diatribe recounting the Gunpowder Plot of Guy Fawkes a few years previously in 1605^h. His undoubted opus vitae, however, is the *Purple Island*. The majority of its 4,879 lines are a description of his *Isle of Man*, in which the human body is allegorized. Purple rivers are veins and arteries, which flow through the chief cities of *Liver*, *Heart* and *Braine*. Fanciful and detailed anatomical descriptions are given for most parts of the body.

THE PURPLE ISLAND

In the original seventeenth century text, the page is bisected into verses of poetry alongside copious marginal notes. These marginalia are essential for the understanding of the verses, and in some cases the notes are longer than the poetry. For example, in his description of the "city" of the *Heart*, Fletcher writes,

*Flankt with two severall walls (for more defence)
Betwixt them ever flows a wheyish moat;
In whose soft waves and circling profluence
This Citie, like an Isle, might safely float
In motion still (a motion fixt, not roving)
Most like to heav'n in his most constant moving:
Hence most here plant the seat of sure and active
loving.*

With alongside it in the margin, the "note"

*The heart is immured partly by a membrane
going round about it, (and thereby receiving his
name) and a peculiar tunicle, partly with a humor
like whey or urine, as well to cool the heart, as to
lighten the body¹⁰.*

The membrane that Fletcher is describing here is the pericardium, which is indeed formed from two layers with lubricating mucus between them, allowing the heart to expand and contract smoothly and without friction with the overlying structures.

Both medical and literary historians have observed that although the poem was published some five years after Harvey's *de Mow Cordis*, the cardiac physiology is definitely Galenic. It had been known that arterial and venous blood somehow mixed, but before Harvey's circulation theory and later the discovery of capillaries, Galen had suggested that the crossover took place in the heart itself by inventing imaginary micropores in the interventricular septum of the heart, which were invisible to the naked eye. In the *Purple Island*, we hear how

The grosser waves of these life-streams...

*As through a wall, with hidden passage slide;
Where many secret gates (gates hardly spid)
With safe convoy give passage to the other side".*

In a margin note Fletcher describes the septal micropores: the septum *at first.. seems thick, but if it be well viewed, we shall see it full of many pores, or passages.*

In his description of the portal vein, he goes on to describe the venous valves (which of course prevent blood flowing backwards).

*In this Heart-citie foure main streams appeare:
One from the Hepar where the tribute landeth,
Largely poures out his purple river here;
At whose wide mouth a band of Tritons' standeth,
(Three Tritons stand) who with their three-forkt
mace
Drive on, and speed the rivers flowing race,
But strongly stop the wave, if once it back repace¹².*

Fletcher (as always) gives copious notes of explanation in the margin and tells us:

*In the heart are foure great vessels: the first is the hollow vein
bringing in the bloud from the liver; at whose mouth stand three
little folding doores, with three forks giving passage but no
return to the blood.*

This reference to the venous valve, which strongly prevents any venous backflow shows that Fletcher was a well-informed Galenist and did not believe in the shuttlewise ebb and flow theory of Empedocles and others.

Langdale (1937) implies that Fletcher understood Harveian circulation¹³, but fairly clearly he is describing the long believed correspondence between blood flow and the "circulation" of Earth surface water. Both Nicolson¹⁴ and Baldwin¹⁵ have challenged Langdale on this. Pohlman (1907), Lambert (1931) and Ober (1967) all credit Phineas Fletcher with a remarkable knowledge of contemporary anatomy, without making unrealistic claims for his physiological theory¹⁶. Harvey's *De Motu Cordis* was published in 1628. It is probable, however, that although Fletcher did not publish the *Purple Island* until 1633, it was compiled over a long number of years and perhaps even started when he was a student at Cambridge. In 1633, Fletcher also published his Latin poems (*Sylva Poetica*), his *Piscatory Eclogs and Other Poetical! Miscellanies* and his late father's *poems.de Uteris antiquae Britanniae*¹⁷.

It must, of course, be remembered that possibly the only anatomical works accessible to him were those of Sylvius (d.1672), Vesalius (d. 1564), Fallopius (d. 1562) and Fabricius (d.1619). However, Fletcher certainly knew about the discovery of the stapes, the tiniest bone of the body in the middle ear, discovered by Ingrassius in 1548. It is referred to as a stirrup (and the malleus and incus as a hammer and stithe respectively) in his verse on the three small ear bones

(ossicles):

*The first an hammer is call'd, whose outgrown sides
Lie on the drumme; but with his swelling end
Fixt in the hollow stithe, there fast abides;
The stithe's short foot doth on the drumme depend,
His longer in the stirrup surely plac't;
The stirrup's sharp side by the stithe embrac't,
But his broad base ti'd to the little window fast⁸.*

His theory of Hearing describing the transmission of sound to that third room, the inner ear or labyrinth, (which, it was believed contained air) is beautifully described:

*As when a stone, troubling the quiet waters,
Prints in the angry stream a wrinkle round,
Which soon another and another scatters,
Till all the alike with circles now is crown'd
All so the aire struck with some violence nigh,
Begets a world of circles in the skie:
All which infected move with sounding quality.
These at Auditus' palace soon arriving,
Enter the gate, and strike the warning drumme;
To these three instruments fit motion giving,
Which every voice discern: then that third room
Sharpens each sound, and quick conveys it thence;
Till by the flying poaste 'tis hurri'd hence,
And in an instant brought unto the judging sense¹⁹.*

The poem consists of twelve cantos. Canto I starts with the *Creation* and the *Fall*, and all the anatomy is contained in Cantos II to VII. It is interesting that the order in which Fletcher presents the parts of the body is the precise order of an early seventeenth century anatomy demonstration (public anatomy demonstrations in those attractive circular dissection amphitheatres were very popular in the Renaissance and followed a definite ritualistic order of performance).

So the anatomy begins on the afternoon of the poem's first day with a description of the bones, veins, arteries and nerves (Canto II), and then moves on to the abdomen the following morning (Canto III), the thorax the second afternoon (Canto IV), and the head (Canto V) on the whole of the third day²⁰.

Following the anatomical descriptions, Canto VI tells of the five senses (and diverse aspects of epistemology).

The final six Cantos VII to XII depart from further anatomical allegories and go on to describe,

an almost Homeric battle between the happy peaceful dwellers on the Isle of Man and the forces of evil, that is the devil and a host of sins (unchastity, irreligion, idolatry, heresy, hypocrisy, unrighteousness, intemperance, hatred and sedition) who are overcome by heaven sent virtues (faith, humility, hope, promise, peace, fortitude, chastity and many others)²¹.

It has been proposed that the poem as a whole expresses *ferocious Protestantism* and was written as anti-Catholic propaganda. Sawday points out that Fletcher was a high puritan who had written other anti-Papist poems; he suggests that the *Purple Island* separated from the mainland symbolizes England separated from Catholic Europe, and that it is *Purple* in allusion to the Protestant colour for mourning; he further holds that the war between good and evil at the end of the poem concludes with the armed Christ saving the little island and the marriage of the daughter of its ruler to none other than the protestant King of England, James I²².

During Fletcher's life and for about a century after his death, the strange epic enjoyed popularity and it is thought to have influenced Milton. His poetry is now, however, no longer easily available and the last "Complete Edition" of his poems was in 1908²³. It is interesting therefore to find that in 1918 James Joyce, whilst in Trieste writing *Ulysses*, told his friend Frank Budgen, the Irish painter,

Among other things, my book is an epic of the human body. The only man I know who has attempted the same thing is Phineas Fletcher. But then his Purple Island is purely descriptive, a kind of coloured anatomical chart of the human body. In my book the body lives in and moves through space, and is the home of a full human personality²⁴.

All the poetry presented above refers to the contemporary anatomical belief that correspondences and signatures are written by God's hand on His copy, man. These examples are at one end of a vast spectrum: at the other pole is the much older and better-known correspondence of Empedocles' haemodynamic theory with the ebbing and flowing of the tides. In parallel with correspondences and signatures were *epitomes*. In *The Purple Island*, the *blessed Isle* is not only the human body; it is also an epitome (or small copy) of England. Donne wrote:

The World is a great Volume, and Man the Index of that Booke; Even in the Body of Man, you may turn on the whole world²⁵.

The *Purple Island* has been described as *an incongruous fusion of poetry and science²⁶*. It has been acknowledged as not only one of the best but also one of the last great examples of the tradition of poetic correspondence in English literature. It certainly exemplifies the contemporary anatomical belief that

The Finger of God hath left an inscription on *all his works²⁷*.

Notes

a The great physician/philosopher/theologian Dr Thomas Browne (1605 - 1682) gives many references to this Universal Analogy in his famous work, *Religio Medici (The Religion of a Physician)*, which was published without his

permission in 1642, and is largely about a physician's perception of the mysteries of God, nature and man.

b Henry More (1614-1687) was a Cambridge poet and philosopher of religion whose affinity for the metaphysics of Plato placed him amongst the group of thinkers known as the *Cambridge Platonists*. His main works argued against the atheistic ideas of Hobbes and Descartes. His poetry was after the style of Edmund Spenser.

c It is interesting to note that St Augustine had previously considered the walnut to be a correspondence of Christ: The outer green case was the flesh of Christ, the shell the wood of His cross and the kernel, His divine nature.

d The Rev George Herbert (1593 -1633) was once an MP, but is mainly remembered as a metaphysical poet who was an Anglican country parson and keen angler like Phineas Fletcher. He was also a keen gardener.

e Since the first publication in 1676, of this classic idyll on the joys and stratagems of Angling, more than 300 editions have been published.

f Beaumont and Fletcher were collaborators with Shakespeare in some of his later works.

g Latin. *The Locusts - otherwise Piety of the Jesuits*. The title *Locusts* implied that Roman Catholicism was a plague on Britain.

h This was an unsuccessful Papist plot to blow up the Houses of Parliament and the protestant king.

i Sons of the sea god, Neptune, usually represented as fishes with human heads, and often carrying tridents or forked spears.

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- 6 Ibid, stanza 46.
- 7 Davies.John (of Hereford) (1602) *Mirum in Medum* and (1603) *Microcosmus*; Underwood, Robert (1605) *The Little World*. (2nd edn. 1612) p. I: this last quotation is taken from Sawday, J.H. (1988) op. cit. (vide infra n. 8) who states (p 158) that there are only two extant copies, in the Folger Shakespeare Library and the Huntingdon Library.

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11 Ibid Canto IV, verse 19.

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Biography

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