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The largest collection of early modern English medical records is held in sixty volumes in the Ashmole Collection at the Bodleian Library, Oxford. These volumes contain detailed records of seventy thousand encounters between a doctor, Richard Napier (1559-1634), and his patients. Most of these records contain astrological charts, each of which is a trellis-like pattern of straight lines interwoven with symbols representing the sun, the moon and the planets. Napier’s casebooks are an invaluable source, not only for historians of medicine but also for intellectual historians and for historians of gender, personhood, and the body. They are not easy to interpret, however. They are not only vast and esoteric but also eclectic, drawing on a range of traditions that include Medieval scholasticism, Renaissance Neoplatonism, and Reformation theology. The last major monograph on Napier’s medical practice, Michael MacDonald’s *Mystical Bedlam*, appeared nearly four decades ago and was confined to the 5% of Napier’s clientele who were mentally disturbed. As of 2018, Napier’s casebooks are freely available online as part of the Cambridge Digital Library, a resource that is indispensible for deciphering individual cases and for compiling statistics on the whole corpus, but which leaves open the question of Napier’s overall intellectual framework. Addressing this question is the main aim of Ofer Hadass’ short but illuminating book.

Hadass begins with an ambitious discussion of the wider literature on intellectual and religious change in early modern England. How should this history be written, now that the old narrative—a decisive shift from superstition to rationality supported by an equally sharp
transition from Catholic allegory to Protestant literalism—is no longer tenable? Social historians have taken one approach, looking beyond the treatises of learned physicians to the wider landscape of early modern medicine. The details of medical practice—taking notes, collecting recipes, preparing drugs, casting horoscopes—are another emerging theme. The result is a richer view of early modern medicine, but one that lacks a certain coherence. “The image of early modern medicine has never been more fragmentary,” Hadass laments (p. 12). His corrective is to show that Napier’s “versatile endeavour was in fact guided by a perfectly coherent view of nature and God” (p. 3).

The first chapter of the book gives a broad overview of the variant of astrological medicine that Napier practiced for the greater part of his life at his residence in Great Linford, Buckinghamshire, where he was admitted to the parsonage in 1589 after graduating from the University of Oxford with a degree in theology. Hadass reviews the main elements of early modern medical theory: the four humours, the doctrine of signs, and the notion of celestial influences that underlay astrology. Hadass is sensitive to the subtleties of these theories and to the distinctiveness of Napier’s own use of them, and he illustrates the latter with copious references to Napier’s casebooks. Hadass gives a clear exposition of the astrological chart, the key technical device in Napier’s notebooks. He also shows that Napier used this device alongside more down-to-earth sources, such as the patient’s temperature, their urine, or their own account of their ailments.

Chapters two and three deal respectively with talismans and conversations with angels, the two staples of Napier’s astrological form of magic. The former topic calls for creative use of sources, since Napier rarely mentions talismans in his casebooks. The next chapter makes full use of the casebooks, “the single surviving source for practical angelic divination and its employment in early modern medicine” (p. 119). Unlike his occasional dinner companion John Dee, another early modern angelomancer, Napier used his interviews
for practical purposes rather than for theological or philosophical insight. “Wether Mr Vnderhill will be recoverd of his e[e] sight & hearing, how & by what meanes,” reads one of Napier’s queries to the archangel Raphael. “A purg, dyet drinke & the oyntment”, comes the reply.

The fourth and last chapter deals with Napier’s religious views. Here Hadass builds on remarks in earlier chapters, where he describes how Napier accommodated his practice of astrology and magic to his Protestant faith. He defended astrology on the grounds that it had been endorsed by many authorities, including ancient ones. In the case of talismans he appealed to Scripture (God did not punish King Salomon for building a temple adorned with images of lions) and to God’s beneficence (“If god give an art, then the use of that art must needs be lawfull”, quoted p. 84). Napier emerges as a conservative Protestant, one who believed in justification by faith alone but who mounted a spirited case for the citation of poetry and pagan philosophers in sermons. In a striking image, Napier compared these diverse sources to the lines of longitude on a spherical globe, “all meeting togeather in the same centre, expounding on[e] another, explaining on[e] another, joynly affirming the same trueth” (quoted pp. 134-5).

As Hadass shows, the same metaphor applies to Napier’s approach to knowledge as a whole. He was an eclectic who brought together a range of disciplines and traditions with the confidence of someone who believes that they all point to the same underlying reality. Hadass perhaps goes too far in saying that Napier’s framework was “perfectly coherent.” After all, he did not have one overarching framework but several different ones. What Hadass does show is that these were interlocking frameworks, and that Napier worked out how to fit them together in the course of his practice as a physician and pastor. The book is not quite the “reconstruction...of historical research” (p. 12) that Hadass promises in the introduction. But it is something just as interesting: a fine-grained study of how an individual used his own
extensive experience to come to terms with the philosophical diversity of the Renaissance. It will be the starting-point for all future research on Napier’s voluminous archive.

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