

## Shiten Mouth Ful of Tordes

Hello, and welcome to this hour, which I am calling Shiten Mouth Ful of Tordes. This is a middle English proverb roughly translating as To fill one's mouth with shit. As a footnote to the title, I came across this proverb on the Middle English Compendium, but I cannot find the primary sources where it occurs, or any interpretation of the proverb, so I guess it to mean the equivalent of talking rubbish or talking shit. So this is what I shall be doing, filling my mouth with excrement, spewing excrement, with you, for you.

A trigger warning before we go any further. I am going to be talking a lot about food practices, laxatives, disordered eating, including restriction and purging, there is frequent reference to fatphobic cultural beliefs, so if any of this is going to be triggering then I advise not listening.

What you are going to hear is a series of works and research that I have produced, mostly related to constipation and laxatives, within a Western European history. It will be a journey across time and space, moving into crip time, medieval conceptions of time as cyclical rather than progressive, anti-capitalist time, against chrononormativity, a lot more crip time. And space, well, I mostly ground my work within Western European history as this is the world I was raised in, one whose cultural legacy I have internalised and carried in my tissues, but I must state this explicitly not to claim this as singular or universal perspective, but rather to underline that this cultural upbringing is highly specific. The worlds I describe are just some among many. But the spaces move from interior to exterior, deep into the marrow and the mawe of the gut and outward from there.

The following hour is structured overwhelmingly by one work, which I have broken up into four acts, with interludes in between to introduce other works and research and ramblings. This structuring text is called *It is proven*, and is based on the *The Physicians of Myddfai*, which is a medieval Welsh herbal medicinal text. Each of the sections are based on a specific gut-related cure (a lot of laxatives in there). The language is anachronistic and moves between Middle English—which you can't necessarily always hear, as a lot of it is just different phonetic spellings of words, such as *sickness* / *sicknesse*—Victorian English, some 18th century slang, notably balsamic injection to refer to ejaculation, some Renaissance medicinal beliefs, some contemporary references. Reading is an act of time travel, and intense contact between the worlds of original authors, translators and readers, so I want to create an indeterminate non-place through this time travel of language. I've also been thinking a lot about medieval conceptions of time as cyclical, as I said earlier. The primary source I used for the text, *The Physicians of Myddfai*, obviously has no narrative as it is a medicinal cure book, so I've been thinking about what narrative builds as a reader through ingesting an aggregate of the text: nothing really happens, but time does move forward, or it moves in some direction, or many directions. And a final warning, this is a protagonist who has very disordered ideas about food, eating, and their own body, so there is a lot of internalised fatphobia throughout the text.

So, to begin.

### [Act 1]

1.94

*I do not react well to the nightshade family. Face and mawe swell and tighten to a point of pain, and I remind myself: do not ete tomatoe, do not ete potatoe, do not ete aubergine, do not ete pepper, and yet still I am drawn to these plants, I lust for them.*

*There was a time when I would ete almost nothing save tomatoe. I would consume, of a day, two pounds of the blede. This would not be in one sitting: no, for I would, throughout the day, ete on, two, thre, a gentle snack. The thought would occur: a tomatoe. This thought then would build in the mind, till I could no longer suppress it, and I would go, ete, graze throughout the day. I did not observe mealtimes, there were no meals, there were only these foul fruit. And do you know, since then I am unable to ingest them, an intolerance borne through oversaturation.*

*Today I ete tomatoe with salt, and the mawe hardens, it bloats outwards. It is difficult to concentrate, so discomforted am I. Clothing is impossibly constricted. I boil duckweed in goat's milk, and bathe the warm lotion on the stomak intermittently throughout the day. And I do curse myself, for my weiknes.*

1.103

*I fear constipation above all other ailments. I have not passed stool in thre days, and fele no urge to. It is no drede: excrement piles up in the colon, slowly hardening into a rock. Feling the creaking stasis of the gut, I boil duckweed in a pot, then cast it into a pan, and fry it with a quantity of blood and butter. This I ete hot, and await its effects.*

1.109

*The constipation is still felt. Five days with no stool and no abdominal cramping; drinche I greet amounts of fluid to no avail. Do you know I astound myself with the quantity of fluid I can ingest. Some years prior to this day, I would take no food save six whites of eggs at eventide. A hunger followed me everywhere, from morning until sleep. At this time, around midday, it was my particular wish to sit and drinche two pints of hot fluid within the space of an hour, and then repeat this operation at dusk. It warmed me, when the flesh was unable to warm itself, and it filled me, when I was not filling myself.*

*On this day, I ingest similar greet quantities of liquid, though in a less concentrated time period, instead staggering my intake as sips, across the hours of daylight. Still, this does not ease the stasis: rather it seems to contribute to it, sitting like a lake atop the sticky, compacted mud lining the intestines. Nothing moves. Thus I take salt and second milk in equal parts. These I place on the fire in an evaporating dish, until it has reduced into a congealed, waxy mass. From this unguent I make suppository cakes and insert one into the rectum, to await its effect.*

1.117

*Surfet. I cannot quite explain why I have frequent lyke to ete so much that I fele quite nauseous. This urge takes over approximately every other day, and I often will ete to the point of extreme distention of the mawe, then purge the contents violently. To inflate then deflate: I need this sensation. This eventide I ete seven bananas and fele extremely sicke, and yet the bananas will not rise through the oesophagus: I cannot purge them. This is abhorrent: the inability to purge is the absolute worst fear of one who will purge.*

*It had been that on Sunnenday, I would ete greet quantity of banana and porridge, then, a mere two houres later, a greet quantity of salmon and wheaten bred, swiftly followed by greet quantity of chocolate brownie and raspberrie, and make myself quite ill throughout Monenday. It was only when I was prescribed the contraceptive pill and the appetite increased quite fourfold that I desired*

*to ete this amount and more, every day, and I knew the flesh would fatten if the appetite gain'd maistry. Lo, apprehend I a violent methodology of purging. It is not a prescription I would*

*recommend or share with you. This eventide, though, it does prove ineffectual, and the bananas remain stuck. I let them be, I digest them, much as I loathe digestion.*

*I take a turnip and boil it in goat milk, and take gentle sips until the stomak is quelled.*

1.122

*The bowels will not loosen, they are obstinately firm and static. I am quite at the end of my tether, knowing that I must continue eten in order to promote peristalsis, and yet not wishing to add to the compounding mass of shit accruing in the mawe. When I lie on my bed, I can fele a thick rope of excrement extending up the transverse colon.*

*Thistles as the thistles on the enamell'd broche my mother would wear, the purple tarnish'd and scuffed. I remember not her wearing this broche, I only remember it sitting in her jewellery box, and should I chance to remove it, she would find it in the hand and she would tell me: this is the first piece of jewellery your father did buy for me. I boil the roots of small thistles that grow in the woods, these roots of thistles I boil in water, this water I drinche with relish.*

1.123

*I am uncertain if I have had an inflammatory response to the nightshade, or if I have gained fat on my flesh, but I will tell you that I gained quite 4 pounds overnight, much to my disgust. This flesh is repellent to me. I have begun drinchen the juice of fennel.*

1.177

*I try to restrain the appetite, for I must curb these urges toward surfet. Fayne would I live long, and a cycle of bingeing and purging may cut short my years without consent. I have heard that ongoing irritation of the throat may cause a canker, or still a rupture through the oesophagus into the flesh beyond. I do not wish for dethe, or to have my dethe discussed in papers and on web sites in lascivious terms. My greet fear is autopsy, my greet fear is to have the contents of the bowel pored over and discussed, my greet fear is that I should be defined by a base and shameful dethe, a dethe by overeting, a dethe that would be discussed with disgust. And so I shall restrain the appetite, and ete slowly. I shall not ingest to the point of distention. This too may aid in evacuation. The irregularity of the bowels is troubling to me: I must work towards a daily evacuation of substantial volume.*

1.188

*Trowe that this lust for fullness is a moral impunity and might represent something sexual. Trowe that I wish to reach a crescendo of food like the crescendo of balsamic injection. I am attempting eten and to allow some appetite to remain. Today, I ete sparingly, allowing myself to maintain a sense of hunger even after each repast. I drinche nothing with my meal, and throughout the day I drinche sparingly, choosing only the coldest water I can obtain. After eten, I take a brief walk in well-sheltered and level ground.*

*Tonight I shall sleep well, but not too much. I must give pause between my meal of eventide and my bed, for it is known that sleep before food will make a body thin, while sleeping after will make one fat.*

*These shall be the rules moving forward:  
Ete two small meals each day, to remain hungry after the meal has passed  
Drinche nothing with each meal  
Sippe only little throughout the day, from the coldest source I might obtain*

*Forbete these chemical sweteners which I will use to make drynk more palatable: I fear they  
aggravate the mawe  
Do make enough time between meals that I might fele empty: this I shall sense from my hunger and  
the thinness of my saliva  
Sleep, some time after my final repast, deeply, but not for too long*

-

A lot of my work stems from personal narrative, particularly around my health, but I use this as an entrance into exploring a Western cultural history of specific narrative strands. I have had an eating disorder for 14 years, and for five years of this I abused laxatives quite heavily until I made myself quite seriously ill. In this case, my laxative of choice was senna-based, and markets itself as gentle and natural, although it caused severe and partially irreparable damage to my guts. Herbalism is often posited as an alternative to the canon of Western alleopathic medicine, which is true, but it is also true that in the West, since the sixteenth century, an industry of herbal cures has defined itself as the benign shadow of harsh medicinal intervention, the gentle balm of plant-cures, which is a lie, we all know, because plants can be incredibly potent.

*GRANA ANGELICA:*

*or,*

*The True SCOTS PILLS (advert from 1733)*

*They exceedingly comfort and Strengthen the Stomach ; they restore the lost Appetite ; they purge  
Choler and Melancholy, but chiefly Phlegm and waterish Matter ; they cleanse the same of all  
putrid, gross and thick Humours ; they comfort the Entrails open Obstructions, and disperse all the  
Pain of these Places.*

*They strengthen the Head and all the Senses, but chiefly those of Hearing and Sight, whose  
Weakness and Pain they remove ; they help the Giddiness thereof, an the Megrin : And as they  
comfort and purge the Stomach, so they do the like to both Head and Heart ; and have this excellent  
Faculty, that being mix'd with other Physick, they correct its Malignity, and make it unhurtful to the  
Stomach ; and are therefore to be preferr'd to all other gentle and easy Medicines.*

*They kill and choke all Worms that are bred in the Bellies of Children, big-bellied Women that are  
bound in the Belly, and of Men ; yea, not any Body that frequently useth these Pills, can breed  
Worms at all.*

*You may use them at your pleasure, whether late or early, or any Hour of the Day, before Meat or  
after Meat, or in Time of Feeding ; but being taken in Time of Supper, they defend the Head (as we  
have said) from those Vapours and Fumes that ascend to it in the Night. They are familiarly taken in  
Time of Meat, without Trouble to the Mind, or Harm to the Body, and not any Hindrance to your  
Business. The Dose is from Three to Seven, Nine or Eleven, according as there Constitution is, some  
week Constitutions to take but one, or two, and that three or four Times a Month, or a Week, as  
Necessity, or the Temper of the Body, shall require. They give not many Stools, neither do they work  
violently, nor suddenly: They open the Belly twelve Hours after they are taken; sometimes in shorter  
or longer. Time: and with some Habits of the Body in the first Dose operates not at all, altho' the  
Dose from three upwards, taken some Days together, operates with the greatest Facility, those  
various Operations arising from the Disposition of the Stomach and the Body : and they may be*

*used without any special Care of Rules in Diet, whether in Summer or Winter, in Frost or Thaw Weather, without any Inconveniency to ensue thereupon.*

I am fascinated by the paradox of an industry which implicitly markets itself on its own inefficacy, which of course, is a lie.

That is herbalism as an industry, not herbal remedy as a practice. Herbal remedy as a practice has existed as another universe of conceiving the body as an alternative to alleopathic medicine, with roots in the West at a time when cure was more often than not something that was produced at home, and so it's important to highlight that my ambivalence is not in the use of plant medicine, which offers a very necessary counter to the hegemony of Western alleopathic medicine and the hubris of scientific rationalism, which believes itself to be a truth.

I am specifically ambivalent about herbalism as an industry, not herbalism as a practice.

[Act 2]

2. 22

*When I go to toilet, I pass only tiny pebbles, after much straining, and little else emerges. It does not represent my daily intake and I fear that if I do not pass a substantial stool soon, the thick and unwieldy serpent of shit in the colon will begin to extend into the small intestine. There is, happily, approximately 25 feet of this organ for it to traverse before it might creep into the mawe, but if nothing happens then perhaps, in a year, I will begin spiwan excrement.*

*When I would take pills derived from the leaves of the senna plant, I would never experience this aggregate of shit. To my infinite earthly delight, there would be a direct correlation between input and output: I might eat my one meal of the day at eventide, then after a good sleep of eight houre, I would evacuate a liquid in which the foods were suspended, barely digested.*

*Sooth, this time was a time of much pain to me, much sicknesse. Fayne I shall never revisit it, but still I sometimes wish I could be this empty again. These tiny pebbles I pass on toilet, these pebbles are mere chips in the enormous boulder residing in the rectum, a compounding of any number of meals of the days prior. I must chip away at the boulder by eten. Must I ete foods that are medicinals, medicinals that are foods, much as I fear that these foods will not be curie. Warily do I take a newly laid hen's egg and remove the white. Into the shell, I scoop unsalted butter to mix with the yolk, until the shell is full. This I warm, then eat. It sits well, but I do not shit. These eggs shall become a regular part of my regimen until I fele colonic spasming.*

2.96

*I cannot express to you my discomfort. I fele now a spasming, and excrement begins to emerge, but it has hardened to a point that it is impossible to pass through the rectum, and so it gives me pain.*

*I take a pennyworth of stibium and grate it as fine as flour, though this process gives me grief, for metal will take some time to grate, even one so soft as stibium—or antimony as you may call it. This powder I mix with a pint of sound ale, and warm. I ete nothing in the morning, and drinche only this liquid.*

*Quite half the houre has passed when a quart of posset do I drinche: I thence proceed drinche again, and once more for good measure—this as instructed. Later, I warm spring water, put some good butter and honey into it, and drinche the draught in two sittings. This consists my day.*

2.97

*When I ended my regimen of senna laxative, I was quite seekly. The recovree was slow, though I did visit a beach upon whose sandy edges plenty bushes of buckthorn grew. I harvested the berries, and these I keep in the freezer for such times as the present. For today the entire gut is static, and I seek the mollificaccioun of the rock of shit. So I express the juice of buckthorn and mixe two spoonfuls with a draught of good ale wort. This drinche I, and await its effects, willing the bowels to loosen. Still they remain obstinate, still they remain static. Thusly I drinche another draught without the buckthorn. I manage to force out a thin, tapering worm of soft excrement, perhaps passed through the spaces around the hardened stone lodged in the rectum, and so I ete some warm oatmeal gruel made with spring water, mixing it with some honey, butter, and unsifted wheaten bred.*

*Over the next nin days I shall follow this regimen thrice. I hope that the tapering worm shall grow to a fattened, thick and muscular snake, which coils out of the rectum and lands in the toilet bowl like a triumphant best. If the best does not make its presence known, I shall lead a further nin days on milk food and wheaten bred.*

2.98

*The abdomen is distended. I take a handful of the leaves of damask roses, boil them in the wort of good ale, and this I drinche. I shalt follow a regimen of milk food and wheaten bred for a further nin days.*

2.99

*Today I have result. After some straining for quite thritti minuten, I manage to dislodge a plug of hardened shit the shape of a bulb of garlic. This is followed by a fat, soft rope quite two inches in diameter, and my relief is indescribable. I shall tell you how I gained maistry over the gut.*

*Two days prior I took honey, and the juice of the fruit of buckthorn, in equal quantity. I boiled these together over a slow heat, and kept in a well-covered glass bottle. Today I take thre spoonfuls of this liquid. Thritti minuten after, I drinche a hearty draught of the wort of strong ale. It is not another thritti minuten until I fele colonic spasming, a dearly-belov'd friend from a distant past. Sitting on toilet, the pain of passing the bulbous plug is quite extreme, such that I worrie I should tear the rectum, but I do not. I have only enough time to turn and observe its form in the water: bitymes it is proceeded by a soft and warm evacuation of what must be almost the full contents of the descending colon. My solas is greet.*

2.106

*I have been experiencing a humoral flatulence which has been weakening both body and mind. My mother once told me: I do not pass wind. She instilled in us a belief that to pass wind was a moral failing, and a failing of femininity in addition. But in this latter endeavour I wish to fail, and so often I fert freely and with relish. And I shall die, all peacefully pickled in ferts.*

*This flatuelence, though, it brings me agonie. And so this morning, before breaking my fast, I take the juice of swete apples, raspberries, plums and blackberries, strained. I set it upon a slow fire, and*

*add a spoon of honey for every draught, bringing the liquid to a gentle boil. I shall drinche a hearty draught of this with my morning meal, and for the next nin days hence shall ete only bred made*

*from highly roasted akorns. My supply of akorns is low, perhaps only enough for two lof. Should I not be able to obtain more in the nin day period, I shall not worry. Many nettles grow by the roots of the swete apple-tres, and these I shall pull up from the ground, dry the roots away from the fire, and grind to a powder to make bred.*

2.107

*Flatulence does not diminish or abate. I cannot pass an houre without emitting a violent and noxious gas. There is no one else to witness the event, so I fele no shame, but I do fele a perpetual discomfort at the tautened mawe, filled with a toxic air. Offen it is swete agonie.*

*I take a spoonful of mustard seed this morning, then again at midday, washed down with good old mead. I shall repeat this dosage again tonight, and tomorwe I shall begin a regimen of milk diet and well-baked wheaten bred, eting small amounts at regular intervals.*

2.161

*Abdominal distention has increased. I have eten no nightshades, no aggravating foods, and yet it continues to swell like a drum. It is eventide. I have eten nothing all day. This is not rare: eten during daylight is more the rarity. I find I am unable to concentrate after food or drynk, and so I fast throughout the daylight houres and will only ete once the sun is set. Today, I take two spoonfuls of the juice of holly. Tomorwe I drinche it thrice, at intervals throughout the day, and continue for nin days.*

So. Conceptions of bodies. They are highly specific. Anatomical understanding is also highly specific to time and place. Bodies are essentially unknowable, all understandings are partial, but Western medicine, since the X ray, is driven towards the idea of transparency and the capacity of science to increasingly see—and thereby know, for seeing and knowing are synonymous in an oculocentric world—the systems and workings of all aspects of the body. Who can say if bodies are ruled by humours, the elements, the planets. In the European Enlightenment, there came to be a conception of bodies as machines, with joints like pistons. The notion of the body as a series of layers of skin, then muscles, then organs, which is centrally organised around a circulatory system with the heart at its core, and a nervous system with a brain at its core: these too are highly Western-specific ideas of what a body is, they are modes of perceiving the body. THis isn't to say they are wrong, or right, but they are one of many modes of description, which will always be partial. For example, if you say to ten people 'describe this lamp', perhaps some will say, well it has a red shade, some might say, well the base looks like a palm tree, some other people will say, it's about the size of a cat, and someone else will say, the lamp is a poor imitation of the sun. Each of these are true, and each of these are partial.

So, there are many different, conflicting and overlapping descriptions and interpretations of bodies and health in the Middle Ages, and one of these that is fascinating to engage with is the writings of Hildegard von Bingen. Some of you may know her writings, some of you may not, certainly I wold never tell you that you *should* know about someone. But Hildegard was a German nun who was alive in the 12th century, though she was born just at the end of the 11th, in 1098. She was a prolific writer and composer, she founded a couple of monasteries, and her writings encompass philosophy, natural history, and visions. She is one of the most renowned Christian mystics. And her music, incidentally, is incredible. Do go and listen to it, and thank you to my friend Margo Howie who first told me about her in 2011, I am much indebted to you.

The reason I am talking about Hildegard now, in this context, is in relation to her writings on bodies and health. It's worth bearing in mind that a humanist construction of individual selfhood is a recent and culturally specific idea. So in Hildegard's cosmology, as with many thinkers at the time, the micro and the macro are in direct dialogue with each other. What is wonderful about a lot of medieval lore is this direct relationship between interior body and exterior geography that is incredibly intimate. Nicholas Culpeper, for example, who you might know for his famous Herbal, also wrote a wonderful book in which astrology is directly correlated with illness: certain planets ruled certain illnesses: these planets also ruled certain plants, and so sickness and cure might be correlated or coordinated through the nexus of astral bodies. And not everything written at this time has to shift through such vast scales: in medieval lapidary lore, which is to say lore of stones, stones can affect the weather, fate and your gut health. And I will talk more about specific texts in the reading list which comes towards the end. But for now, let's focus on Hildegard. Hildegard wrote within the notion of humoral theory, and the humours were also in correlation with the seasons, and the elements. So bodies are highly intimate with their geography, they can affect and be affected by them, but more importantly, they are not essentially distinct from them, so your sickness may be part of a wider wave that is carrying all other surrounding environments, bodies, plants, sentient and nonsentient beings and matter.

Frances Drayson asked me to write a response to their show at Lily Brooke last year, or I should say in the year of 2019 in case you listen to this in the years subsequent to me speaking. I wrote a text which is structured around various moments in Hildegard von Bingen's medicinal writings, where she references the gut, and these references shift between scales and architectures.

### **[Tasting Barbels, the text written in response to Frances Drayson's show]**

1.

*Hildegard von Bingen: When a person eats, the fine blood vessels that sense the taste distribute it throughout the body. The internal blood vessels, namely those of the liver, the heart, the lungs, and the stomach, receive the finer juice from these foods and carry it through the entire body.*

I have a highly developed taste system through which I navigate this world. My entire skin is covered in taste buds, which become more concentrated in barbels around my mouth. Through these I can taste prey, I can taste environment, I can taste excrement, and I know which way to move.

As I move into Piccadilly Circus tube station I can taste layers of grey dirt accumulating at edges of steps. On prickly plush of the underground seats, I taste sweat of countless, nameless strangers, bisected by a single, long red hair, bulbous at one end where it once attached to head. Everything I touch, I taste. I am eating everything, I am unable to filter it out, it brushes against skin and moves into my digestive tract, a solid, undigestible, lumpen mass hardening in my stomach. Some days I am overwhelmed by taste and I cannot leave the bed, but as I roll around in my sheets, I taste my own body and I am disgusted, and I do not know how to shut it out, how to sever my connection to the world. I must always be touching something, and so I am always tasting, always eating, always absorbing, a constant, horrific intake which builds up in a toxic load. I carry this in my tissues, in the soft parts, like piles of soil in silken bags.

2.

*Hildegard von Bingen: The stomach has been created in the human body for the purpose of absorbing and digesting all foods. It is tough and somewhat wrinkled on the inside, so that it can retain food for digestion and not let it slip away too quickly in the stool. In the same way, the*



*bricklayer roughens the stone, so that it will take on the mortar and hold it tight, and it will not run apart and fall on the earth.*

Everything slows and stagnates in your gut. You can feel it sitting there, a hardening rock of shit in your colon, a compound mass of any number of meals you have eaten over the past week. Perhaps it is longer, who knows how long this shit had been forming. There might be tiny particles, flakes of dessicated shit from the first solid meal you ate, gently shedding into this compound mass. Your guts moulded and shaped, kneaded the ball of chyme into a cloacal lump, its outside desiccating like greying clay. It may harden to stone, and, too wide to pass through the rectum and out of the gentle, silken pucker of tender anus, it may stay there forever. Blockage, stoppage, stuck.

Lying down, the stuffed rope of large intestine stretches around your abdomen. You can feel the solid mass of shit compiling in your colon, no doubt taut with the tension of shielding your organs from this fetid mass, and you prod it through your skin and layers of membranes, you prod it in disgust, wishing you could claw out the contents, wishing you could claw out the intestines themselves, become a clean through pipe from mouth to anus. Your guts, their functioning, the mysterious bloating and gripings and pains and passages, they are all unknowable to you, untraceable and unquantifiable. Why does constipation feel so amoral, you will ask yourself, the sense of being poisoned by your own digestive system, a poison spreading from your organs to your soul.

3.

*Hildegard von Bingen: Therefore they curdle in the stomach, become hard and mouldy, so that they spread slime in the stomach. Like a rotting manure pile, they send out bad fluids and harmful, terrible smelling fumes throughout the whole body, like when green or wet wood burns an evil smoke and circulates everywhere in the body.*

You will abuse laxatives for five years, drawn to the illusion of control it supplied. Master of the alimentary canal, able to wholly monitor and control input and output.

Your system of digestion is vast, metres long, twisted, bending and convoluted ropes of puffy intestine stuffed with food. Ingested matter will become a bolus formed of saliva and food, then pass into the stomach and be churned into chyme which passes into the small intestine where nutrients will be absorbed and the remaining blend of chyme and chyle will move to the colon, where water will be sapped until it becomes excrement which is held in the rectum until it passes out of the anus, as a solid stool. But abusing laxatives for over five years, this process of digestion and absorption, of transformation and incorporation, had been partial at best. Food would rush through your system at such a pace that it was easily recognisable as its original foodstuff once it left your body again, all suspended in a slimy liquid, waters drawn from tissues. Spinach leaves, chunks of chewed up egg white, the grainy pulp of porridge: all rushed through and out, landing in the toilet bowl like so much vomit, barely acknowledging their sojourn in the ileum, the duodenum, the colon. It felt clean, matter passing through you cleanly. It had been a relief to eat and then a matter of mere hours later, feel the familiar painful clench of colonic spasming, followed by a mucosal drool as bowel contents were voided. Food passed through indiscriminately and barely digested, and so you were able to easily trace each bowel movement to a specific meal. Input, output. When you came off laxatives, the first time you had a solid bowel movement was truly horrific, for you passed from a transparent to an opaque system of functioning, and output could not be directly correlated with input.

Purus, purgare, Purgier, purge: the word derives from the Latin to purify: to rid the body of that which would contaminate it.

You yearn to feel pure and clean and empty and hollow a perfect vessel for moral sanctity. Now that food is inscribed upon your body in pads of fat, your flesh no longer bears testament to the internal slime lurking in your intestines, your brain, your tissues, the slime that is your chaotic and constipated inability to process the world.

4.

*Hildegard von Bingen: The food which provides growth to human tissues is digested in the first night after consumption. Food providing strength for the intestines [and endocrine glands] is assimilated on the first day after consumption. . . The food which contributes energy to the liver is digested on the second day. Foods invigorating the spleen are digested on the third day. But the food nourishing heart and blood finishes its digestion on the tenth day, because heart and blood rely on almost the same energy.*

They had decided to install a grille across the two arches under the bridge, perhaps to stop people swimming through. A nameless they had decided. Now, all of the waste thrown into the canal, all of the waste that found itself in the canal, was trapped, and built up in an aggregate mass. Yellowing plastic milk bottles and bundled up soiled nappies and leaves and cigarette butts and other ubiquitous waste material probably some feathers and definitely some leaves and you know those striped plastic bags and a flourishing microbiome and the skeletal remains of an otter all mashed together into a single body, limbs of trees protruding awkwardly, a compounded, impacted lump of heavy time. They had done this.

-

Ok, and now we move into the next section of It is proven.

### [Act 3]

2.198

*Distention has decreased, though occasional cramps do hinder my daily activities. I take a little tansy and reduce it to a fine powder. This I take with white wine to remove the pain.*

2.199

*I take some tansy and southernwood, boile together and ete well with salt. I ete nothing else this day. Agonies across the mawe continue to attend me.*

2.265

*For two days now I have been in the grip of an unease in the mawe, that I cannot locate as either hunger or sicknesse. At once I focus upon this pain and it eludes me in its origin. I try eten and it neither abates nor increases; I try avoiding food and the same conclusion arises. Verily it remind me of the time immediately after I ceased heavy dosing of laxative, and I became convinced that this malaise was due to autointoxication: the vapours of my shit slowly poisoning me. Mayhap this is happening now.*

*I take a pint of the juice of fennel and boil it with a pint of clarified honey. This morn I take a spoonful, abstaining from any other food or drynk, and I shall repeat again before the day is spent. The next nin days shall be spent thus.*

2.290

*The contents of the stomak sit heavy and unmoving, perhaps slowly dessicating and hardening. Induracioun. I must purge before the chyme and chyle turn to a solid and immovable rock that threatens not only the digestion, but the very existence. The hed feles quite as full as the gut. I shall take thre spoonfuls of the juice of betony for thre days hence. Upon completion, I shall place in the nostril the feather tips of a wing, its irritation proving a good emetic for hed and mawe.*

2.327

*As October crumples and folds into the beginnings of a winter, I take precautionary measures, knowing what will come. Before all hallows eve, I take treacle, a quart of red wine, a pennyworth of mustard, thre pennyworth of aloes, and boil together. This I store in a vessel, in preparation for the time of winter. The flesh is weak, and cannot warm itself, and the guts fail.*

*It is no drede: winter be the time I fall apart.*

*Now, the weder has taken a turn, and so too has the complexion. The November wind blows harsh and chills the marrow, it chills the stomak. As consequence the gut has quite ceased to move for some days, the food being rejected and the bowels confined. I have begun to take this liquid preparation in the morning while fasting, two spoonfuls. Als, take I a pennyworth of fennel and boil it in clarified honey, using the leaves which are superior to the seed. When my present cordial runs out, I shall begin on this preparation.*

2.341

*The stoppage in the guts has shifted lower, a leaden weight moving from stomak to intestine. I find myself again in the position of being unable to pass stool, feling neither colonic spasming nor the ability to force any excrement to emerge, much as I might will or strain. I shall tell you my regimen:*

*I take the roots of gladwyn, the inner bark of the elder and the juice of the house leek. These I pound well in a mortar, and mixe with old ale. I strain these through a clean cloth and drinche whilst fasting. In not on houre the blockage lifts, I fele a familiar and comforting discomfort around the kid-neres, and lo I pass a significant quantity of small, hardened pellets, like the droppings of a rabet.*

2.455

*I am not ashamed of my flatulence, it is proof that I am not a womman, or I am disobedient to wommanli ways. It is not ladylike to pass wind. As the sun begins to set on this day, I take wild carrot seed and bind into pills using honey. Tomorwe I shall take four at daybreak and again verrei night, and repeat for thre days.*

2.457

*The spring does usually bring a renewed appetite, and yet the stomak feles the flat and grey of a lack of hunger. I see food in abundance and cannot crave it: I crave the craving. I will boil centaury in spring water, and drinche nin spoonfuls. For thre days I shall fast, and pray that the hunger returns.*

2.467

*I cannot stand it, again I am struck with the indouracioun and solidification of the colon. A rock of shit resides in me, I fele the thickened rope curling around the abdomen, framing the gut in its immobility. I remember a time as a child when I could not pass stool for some days, a hardened bezoar of shit lodged in the rectum and watery stool would pass around it, I fouled my underwear, I lay in bed in pain, and yet to strain on the toilet, well the shit was lodged, it caused me agonie. The memorie of these days haunt me still, and I fear constipation above all else. And so I take the roots of gladwyn, and pound them as I would garlic, with good old ale. I let it stand aside a space of time, then strain, and warm as a potion. I shall take again this eventide before sleep, for this is a proven laxative.*

2.475

*If the stomak would be still, then perhaps the mood would improve. I fele a perpetual disaise, from a humoral imbalance, it is no drede. This disaise overtakes the mind, that I am unable to focus on anything save the bodily disorder and disobedience. Today this fleshly unrest manifested in a swelling of the stomak. I fele the tightening of the flesh and I loathe it. I will the flesh to do otherwise and it does not obey. I cannot fathom it. Arm may bend upon my maistry, and yet stomak moves not, it will not inflate or deflate, move or stop.*

*An unwieldy best it is, with so much agency I wonder that I should call it my own.*

*I take the whey of goat milk, and pound the herbs called ramsons, which you may call wild garlic, or bears garlic. These two I mixe together and strain, and this liquid shall be my only drynk for thre days hence.*

-

I thought, as an end point, it would be nice to provide a bibliography, or a reading list of sorts. This is not extensive, or exhaustive, but most of the books in some way relate to either plant or lapidary—which is to say, of stone—medicine. Some are primary sources, some are secondary sources. I often start from secondary sources and then use their bibliography, or texts they reference, to find primary sources. These are mostly just some good almanacs, and a really varied mix of medicinal texts and practices from antiquity to the Renaissance so you know, not being ambitious in my remit. Anyway this is just fractional, it's not totalising, think of this as a series of periscopic insights, not a broad overview of anything.

Terry Breverton (translator) *The Physicians of Myddfai*

This is the book that the text I read to you was based on. It contains lots of cures for lots of things: I focussed upon gut related cures, but there really is everything in there, wounds and headaches. It's not really organised in any way, which is why I found it so fascinating to respond to and produce a narrative from. It's basically just a list, numerical, of cures, with headings, so if you want to find something you have to just go through it all, and there are multiple cures for the same illness. Clearly, I mean the text that I read to you has about twenty laxatives. The translation was done in the early twentieth century and contains all of these explanatory footnotes attempting to redeem or explain the text through at the time contemporary values, medicine or understanding. Which is always fascinating, as it demonstrates how Western alleopathic medicine tends to understand itself as having finally arrived at THE TRUTH.

*The Book of Secrets of Albertus Magnus*

I love this book. It's not very long, you could read it in a gentle afternoon if you are a person who reads for a few hours straight. Not everyone is, and that is also good. It's organised by Herbs, Stones, Beasts, Planets, and Marvels of the World. It's hard to say that the book is medicinal, per se, because it contains cures for sickness but it also contains prescriptions for stones which will give you foresight. The marvels of the world section is really a very broad overview of other recipes or receipts which don't necessarily fit into the other categories, or include cures from a mix of animal vegetable and mineral, including invisible ink that can only be read at night, how to make someone appear to have three heads, how to make someone appear headless, and also the invaluable wisdom that *if any man shall have many Eels in a wine vessel, and they suffer to die in it, if any man drink of it, he shall abhor wine for a year, and by chance evermore*. So if you find dead eels in your wine, you might be put off wine, which I feel like, Albertus, that point really didn't need to be stated in terms which make it sound like a revelation.

Nicholas Culpeper *Astrological Judgement of Diseases from the Decumbriture of the Sick*

You may, or may not be, familiar with Nicholas Culpeper *Culpeper's Complete Herbal*. No issue either way, I'm certainly not one of those people who functions with this assumption of shared knowledge, which usually is just a means to uphold a Eurocentric canon of literature or art, and a means of shaming and marginalising practices, thinking, writing and making that exists beyond this extremely narrow purview. But anyway, Culpeper is most widely known for the Herbal, but he also wrote this incredible book which talks about astrological interventions in health. It's quite useful to remember that astrology was part of mainstream science and philosophy in the West until comparatively recently, and its discrediting is actually more recent. I will say that Albertus Magnus' book, for example, is a book I could sit and read like you would a novel, but this is quite dense and dry and more of a reference text. It's organised first astrologically and then by disease, so it's quite easy to dip into and out of depending on your research.

Anne van Arsdell *Medieval Herbal Remedies: The Old English Herbarium and Anglo Saxon Recipes*

Again, another translated compendium, organised by plant rather than illness, as with many of these texts. For some reason, contains a ridiculous number of cures for snake bites, I think every other page makes reference to a cure for them.

Claude Lecouteux *A Lapidary of Sacred Stones: Their Magical and Medicinal Powers Based on the Earliest Sources*

This is a really wonderful secondary source. It is, simply, an alphabetised compendium of stone and lapidary healing from medieval and ancient sources, and some of the stones are still extant in contemporary Western taxonomies, and some do not directly translate, such incredibly beautiful Lyncurium, or ligurius, which according to its legend is produced from lynx urine and a sort of earth that the lynx buries his piss under. A lot, but not all of the entries list the original source or sources of their information.

Nicholas Everett *The Alphabet of Galen*

This book is one of those wonderful parallel texts, so on the recto page it has the Latin original, and on the verso it has the English translation. A slightly confusing fact about this text is that it has absolutely nothing to do with Galen, the Roman physician who lived in the second century AD. In fact, this is a pharmacological text whose origins are slightly mysterious, as the time and place that it was originally produced are not fully known, though it is believed to be Greek. However, the earliest extant version of the manuscript is written in Latin, from the 7th century. This version of the book has a very lengthy introduction, and it also has some wonderful facsimile pages of the manuscript itself, which is beautifully illustrated, and then it has this alphabetised pharmacopeia of cure. Some of it is plant, some of it is mineral, some of it is animal, but it isn't organised taxonomically under these principals, and whilst there are many familiar entries such as Aloe, then

there are also extremely ambiguous ones, such as Alcimonium, whose entry reads: *Alcimonium has two types, one that seems dry and the other liquid. Some say that both are derived from the sap of a tree which grows in Judea and other places. Yet others affirm that it is a greasy substance found in lagoons and which is very gluey and coagulates to float upon the surface of swamp waters.* And so it goes on, describing something extremely vague and indiscernible.

#### Ibn Sina (Avicenna) *The Canon of Medicine*

Arabic and Persian medicine and science had an enormous impact on medieval culture in the West, and is largely responsible for the secularisation of medicine, the Enlightenment, and rationalist science in Western Europe. So this book is one among many that are important, and often underacknowledged in the bizarre rhetoric that Western Europe has produced for itself in believing itself to be, and to have always been, the pinnacle of human thought and other hubristic BS.

Ibn Sina was a Persian polymath who wrote philosophy, theology, mathematics, around 980 to 1040 AD. Unfortunately if you are looking for his work in English you are more likely to find it under the Latinate name Avicenna, which was a Latin corruption of his name. This of course happened all the time, it's why the Arabic author Yahya ibn Sarafyun is referred to as Serapion the Elder, and his most famous treatise is referred to as *Pandectae*; it's why Confucius is called Confucius and not his Chinese name K'ung-fu-tzu, but this Latinisation of names is a practice which is then eclipsed by the Victorian tendency to name manuscripts after the European person who stole them, rather than the original author, like The Ebers Papyrus, so that's nice. My work is quite specific to Europe, so I can talk about Ibn Sina in reference to his impact in the West, but this is not to say that the most important aspect of his enormous legacy is that he played a huge role in the West, because the books were written in Persian and embedded within an Islamic cosmology, and have held an equally enormous impact in the Islamic world and the Middle East. It's simply that, I don't think it's appropriate for me to talk about worlds that I am not a part of, as though I could ever fully understand them, so I'm going to stay in my lane. And Ibn Sina's influence on Western thinkers is enormous, and this book, *The Canon of Medicine*, was widely used as the standard medical textbook in Europe until the 18th century. It's quite expensive to get hold of a copy, as in upward of £80, but it's a big tome, so if you want to dip into it, then Laleh Bakhtiar, who has translated one version of this, also produced a book called *Avicenna on Healthy Living: Exercising, Massaging, Bathing, Eating, Drinking, Sleeping, and Treating Fatigue*.

#### Monica H. Green (editor & translator) *The Trotula: An English Translation of the Medieval Compendium of Women's Medicine*

So this is a very interesting book. It was produced at a time and place where Woman was essentially referring to anyone assigned female at birth, it's a cis binary definition, so a more accurate title of this book would be a compendium of gynaecological medicine, as a lot of the cure is gynaecological. What's interesting about it is that it was for a long time thought to have been produced by one author, a mysterious female physician Trotula, but the researcher and translator Monica H. Green reveals that it is in fact three separate texts brought together: 'these three works reflect the synthesis of indigenous practices of southern Italians with the new theories, practices and medicinal substances coming out of the Arabic world.' The version I have is not the parallel translation with the original medieval Latin text facing the translation, but this is also available, I just think I didn't buy it cos it was hardcover, more expensive and you know, I don't speak Latin.

#### Francis Young (editor) *The Peterborough Lapidary*

The version I have of this book, edited by Francis Young, is a parallel text with the middle English in one column and the contemporary English alongside. You may have noticed I'm kind of obsessed with parallel translation texts, even though most of the time they are in Latin or Old French or Ancient Greek and I speak not these languages, but somehow their presence feels important, as though I am closer to the author. But this is middle English, which is more easily discernible, and I am trying to learn fluently right now, so, yes friends, all the thorns and yoghs abounding, really I

think this may be my favourite book in here, or, hmm ok it's joint with Albertus Magnus. It draws a lot on Isidore of Seville also, which, ah, should I add that book to the list, this list is getting ridiculously long. Ok fine it's going on here, Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies*, very good lapidary text. But anyway, back to the Peterborough lapidary, it's organised alphabetically by stone. Like a more exhaustive Albertus Magnus, but it's much more rooted in medicinal cures, whereas Magnus is more to do with stones and fate and the wider world, with some reference to interior health. So in The Peterborough lapidary, for example, the entry for Beryl reads that *he allows a man to bear suffering. Also he gives good understanding, and is good against the sickness of the liver, and also against retching and vomiting*. All of the stones are gendered, interestingly, and gendered as male. I'm not saying that's a good thing, but it is interesting and not incidental.

### Hildegard von Bingen

Obviously, I talked about Hildegard in a work that I read to you. As with so many writers at the time, Hildegard combined pragmatic cure with mysticism, and astrology with gut health, so bodies are ruled by micro and macro, and health is very much a nested sphere. So here are three books which are worth reading:

### Hildegard von Bingen *Physica*

This is an almanac of cures based on plants and animals. If you want to read just the plants, then Beacon press have produced a book called *Hildegard's Healing Plants*, which is the same writings, it's just the plants section, and if you're I don't know, getting this as a gift, it's quite a nice book, it's well laid out.

### Sabina Flanagan (translator) *Secrets of God: Writings of Hildegard von Bingen*

is a translation of some of her writings by Sabina Flanagan, and crucially contains Causes and Cures, which is a really valuable body of writing on healthcare, and where all of the citations in my text are drawn from. Also, a secondary source that is quite interesting, written in the 1980s, is *Hildegard of Bingen's Medicine* by Dr Wighard Strehlow and Gottfried Hertzka, which was a book which actually sparked a lot of the cultural interest in her writings on health. It was originally written in German and worked from the original manuscripts, so what vexed me at first is that it refers to manuscripts which have been retitled since their translation. And finally, another secondary source, which is quite dry, but interesting, is *Rooted in the Earth, Rooted in the Sky: Hildegard of Bingen and Premodern Medicine* by Victoria Sweet, which, if you are into histories of botanical medicine as so many of us are in the now of 2020, just know that one of the chapters is titled 'Gardener of the Body'.

Ok, finally, just a few secondary sources, if you are not looking to read something which is essentially a dictionary of cures, and are looking for something with more of a narrative, someone to guide you through, gently.

### *The Expressiveness of the Body and the Divergence of Greek and Chinese Medicine* by Shigehisa Kuriyama

This book, is, frankly, amazing, and really shines a light on how the Western attempt to recuperate, absorb and understand Chinese medicine through their own, or our own, narrow bandwith completely misses the fact that this knowledge practice is produced in an entirely different paradigm of world-building, and how western notions of anatomy, what the body is, and how it functions are not universal, but highly specific. It's really great, the chapter on pulse and qiemo is particularly good.

### Katherine Knight *Secrets of the Seventeenth Century Medicine Cabinet*

This book honestly gives me nightmares whenever I look at the cover. I'm actually not listing its full title, which horrifically is *How Shakespeare Cleaned His Teeth and Cromwell Treated His*

*Warts: Secrets of the 17th Century Medicine Cabinet*. Mainstream publishing and manuscript rights honestly make me anxious just thinking about them. There seems to be a thing where someone, some gross someone, in Harper Collins or wherever, is like ‘I know, let’s take your work of serious and ponderous research and try and rebrand this as a book to go in the humour’. This also happened with Brian Dillon’s book on hypochondriacs, which first time round had a very nice cover with a black and white photo of Andy Warhol, and then was reprinted with a new title and terrible, awful caricature art, which made it seem like one of those books that are sold around Christmas time as something to give to someone you don’t really know as a secret Santa present. Ugh. Anyway. This book is really good. Most of the author’s research is drawn from manuscripts held in the Wellcome Library, a lot of them home receipt or recipe books, in which food and medicine coalesce. It’s also really well written. The cover makes me want to vomit.

*Passions and Tempers* by Noga Arikha.

If you want to know about the history of humoral theory, read this. It’s good. I enjoyed reading it, it’s nicely written.

Jo Wheeler *Renaissance Secrets: Recipes and Formulas*

At the opposite end of the scale from the Katherine Knight Cromwell warts debacle, this book is really, very beautiful. If you want to give someone a gift, I dunno, I’d be happy to get this book, it’s produced by the V&A, it’s hardcover with a nice monochrome aesthetic. It’s an odd dimension, it’s very tall and thin, which makes it very pretty, but kind of weird to read. It’s not an exhaustive resource. Essentially, it needs to swap covers with Katherine Knight’s book, because it looks like it would be quite in depth, when in fact it’s more structured by example, and organised around specific objects in the V&A collection. Also I should say, this is because it is not just talking about medicine, it’s also talking about recipes for ink, and perfume, and talismans, so that’s really nice. The only reason I am including this book is that everything else is really quite dense and heavy, and maybe you just want something to browse, something light to kind of dip into the topic, if you don’t really have a specific framework, area of research or singular area of investigation. Sometimes it’s nice to read something without thinking how can I recuperate this into my own work, and if you are an artist or a writer I think that’s a really important exercise to carry out, otherwise you just end up consuming culture like pacman. This is also how the entitlement of White Eurocentrism ends with people appropriating knowledges from cultures not their own, often fetishising folk and indigenous knowledge. You know you don’t have to regurgitate everything that you read and make it into your work, don’t read only inside the Western canon because obviously don’t do that, but don’t try and assimilate other knowledges and practices into your own work. Jesus.

[Act 4]

2.484

*Gastrodynnia. I bruise camomile and boil in a pint of wine till reduced by half.*

2.485

*Gastrodynnia. I take wild carrots, and cover with water, and leave to infuse. I use the water as a drynk for my day.*

2.649

*Again I am met by the unruly swelling of the stomak, extending beyond the waistband of my denim. I must loosen my jean, and walk around my home with unbuttoned trouser. In such a state of*



*discomfort, I take the roots of fennel and the roots of ash, and pound well, tempering with wine and honey. The expressed liquor shall be my drynk from now until the day is closed.*

2.749

*Gastrodynnia. I take mugwort, plaintain and red nettle. This I boil in goat's whey, strained through linen, and administer to myself.*

2.762

*I worry that my pains indicate a wider illness, perhaps a sicknesse more serious than distempers. Wary am I to admit true sicknesse: my dethe is something unfathomable to me, a thing impossible, a thing that may never pass. I do not seek diagnosis, I will axe no one else, no one might know, but tonight before bed I shall bruise violets and apply them to the eie-brous. If I sleep I shall live, and if not: well, my fate is sealed.*

2.765

*After much stoppage, excrement now runs out of me like a torrent, more fluid than solid, a translucent yellow that could be mistaken for piss, if it was not pouring from the rectum. A river it is, and it burns the asshole something special.*

*The yolk of seven eggs, twice as much of clarified honey, the middle of a wheaten lof reduced to fine crumbs, and a pennyworth of powdered pepper: all boiled together, and eten warm. This shall be my curie.*

2.769

*I return to a stagnation of the colon. Thus I take small beer, unsalted butter, and wheat bran, boil well and strain. This I pour into a bladdre, into which I insert a quill, then tye up the bladdre around it. This quill I pass gently into the rectum, the hed being lower than the pelvis, and I force the fluid into the body, then right myself as quickly as possible. Results follow quickly, though only a small amount of shit produced, and what pours out of me is mostly what I pour'd in.*

-

Ok, so now we reach the final point. I'm not going to provide you with an ending, or a neat conclusion, because I don't want to create something which feels concluded, or ended, when this could be endless, it is endlessly cyclical. But once this has ended, then do go, make yourself a refreshing cordial of plants, or a gentle herbal preparation, and do make sure it is gentle. Go take care of your guts, your innards, the flesh and the mawe and the microbiome, take good care of yourself and the nonselves that live within you.