

Washington University in St. Louis

Washington University Open Scholarship

Spring 2018

Washington University
Senior Honors Thesis Abstracts

Spring 2018

A Reasonable Faith? The Relationships between Faith and Reason in the Medical World of the Sixteenth Century

James McMullen

Washington University in St. Louis

Follow this and additional works at: https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/wushta_spr2018

Recommended Citation

McMullen, James, "A Reasonable Faith? The Relationships between Faith and Reason in the Medical World of the Sixteenth Century" (2018). *Spring 2018*. 89.

https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/wushta_spr2018/89

This Abstract for College of Arts & Sciences is brought to you for free and open access by the Washington University

Senior Honors Thesis Abstracts at Washington University Open Scholarship. It has been accepted for inclusion in Spring 2018 by an authorized administrator of Washington University Open Scholarship. For more information, please contact digital@wumail.wustl.edu.

A REASONABLE FAITH? THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN FAITH AND REASON IN THE MEDICAL WORLD OF THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

James McMullen

Mentor: Colette H. Winn

Ordinarily, we recognize the Renaissance as a revolutionary break in Western society—the irreparable division between modernity and the intellectual stagnation of the Dark Ages. The dogmas of religion are often critiqued, if not denounced, for stifling this progress for centuries; humanism, and its doctrine of scientific rationalism, is credited in turn for breaking through the philosophical oppression of that era. But are such clean characterizations just? Does logical reason inherently subvert the concept of faith? Certainly humanism demands a committed faith in humanity, but does that belief preclude faith in God? In recent years, there has been a tendency within Western society to diametrically oppose the institutions of science and faith. But where does this dichotomy originate? Did the writers of the 16th century indeed approach this conclusion of incompatibility between faith and reason, or is such an attribution anachronistic to their beliefs? This thesis, written under the guidance of Colette H. Winn, thus examines these questions, many of which still touch our modern society. Using period medical texts as a point of departure—medicine being the logical intersection between applied science and faith (be that faith in God or in humanity as the case may be)—this work analyzes the manner with which three authors synonymous with the French Renaissance address these questions. In the first chapter, the relations between the grotesque and the ‘true tales’ of François Rabelais are considered. In the second chapter, the religious imagery is analyzed in the didactic poetry of the physician, Jerome Fracastor. In the final chapter the rational skepticism of Michel de Montaigne is discussed in regards to its implications for religious belief. This thesis thus suggests that faith and science represent different fashions of considering the same existential questions: approaches that need not be mutually exclusive.