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A Prayer Against the Sweating Sickness :
Oratio contra infirmitatem sudoris
(Keio Univ. MS 120X. 432. 1)

William Snell

“Thus, what with the war, what with the sweat,
What with the gallows, and what with poverty, I am
custom-shrunk.”

Shakespeare: *Measure for Measure* (1604) I. ii

Among a number of rare medieval documents contained in the collection of Keio University Library, is to be found a well-preserved Latin fourteenth-century manuscript in several hands, presumed from Syon (Sion) Monastery, of *De Regimine Principum* (c.1280) by Aegidius Romanus (the Augustinian friar Giles of Rome [c.1243-1316] Archbishop of Bourges),⁽¹⁾ and two pseudo-Aristotelian works, the *Secreta Secretorum* and Book of the Apple, *De pomo (eiusdem pomo tractatus)*.⁽²⁾ The Aegidius contains a *Tabula*, compiled and probably written by the London Augustinian friar John Drayton. On the last leaf, amongst some other inscriptions, is a brief though poignant prayer in a later hand, also in Latin: a plea for the Virgin Mary to intercede against the “Sweat”, an epidemic disease which supposedly ravaged England in the wake of the bubonic plague.

This malady first manifest itself in the south east of the country in the summer of 1485, after Henry VII’s landing at Milford Haven, and went on to ravage his army after the victory at Bosworth, causing his coronation to be postponed⁽³⁾ (and killing three lord mayors;⁽⁴⁾

however, the epidemic may have started elsewhere in the provinces, perhaps even in the north).⁽⁵⁾ It appears to have lasted until July-August 1551-52.⁽⁶⁾ Despite the fact that it is so well-recorded, the aetiology of the disease continues to defy thorough explanation.

As the nomenclature suggests, *Sudor Anglicus* was very much a disease confined to the shores of England, apparently not crossing the borders of Scotland or Wales and distinguished clearly from other plague diseases of the late Middle Ages, although it does not appear to have had more than a marginal influence on demography compared with other plagues. It has even been asserted that foreigners resident in the country remained free from the sickness.⁽⁷⁾ According to John F. Drew Shrewsbury, the disease took six years to spread to Ireland and this slow rate, he argues, is reason enough to rule out influenza, “an identification generally favoured by medical writers.”⁽⁸⁾

The Sweat (also known as the “Sweating Sickness” or “Sweating Fever”; also “Picardy Sweat”) was, along with other plagues, the topic of some engaging correspondence in *Notes and Queries* from 1864 to 1884,⁽⁹⁾ and inspired the first vernacular printed book on medicine, the *litil boke* by the Swedish bishop Benedictus Kanuti (Canutus) on the 1486 plague⁽¹⁰⁾ which gives a graphic description of the sickness’s arrival in 1485. But the disease might perhaps be best remembered for its appearance in Shakespeare’s contemporary Thomas Nashe’s prose romance of adventure *The Unfortunate Traveller, or the Life of Jack Wilton*, written in 1594 :

Let me ... tell a little of the sweating sickness that made me in a cold sweat take my heels and run out of England If those that were sick of this malady slept of it, they never waked more.⁽¹¹⁾

Nashe was clinically accurate in his observations. The symptoms are reputed to have been somewhat akin to influenza, beginning with shivering, giddiness, headache, pains in the neck and shoulders; an acute febrile attack, together with rapid breathing and sometimes accompanied by vomiting. This could last from a half to three hours followed by a fever and sweating, rapid pulse, chest pains and collapse with the desire to sleep, which was thought fatal to succumb to. These symptoms could last anything up to twelve to twenty-four hours but were sometimes fatal in two or three hours. Robert S. Gottfried⁽¹²⁾ claims that in some cases it killed ten percent of the population, although this statistic is questionable.

As mentioned above, the exact nature of the affliction remains a mystery. It may have been an arbovirus (i.e. transmitted by arthropods, especially insects, which cause such diseases as encephalitis and yellow fever) infection of some kind.⁽¹³⁾ According to contemporary accounts, apart from the physical aspect the other distinguishing features are a tendency to attack a community suddenly, and the majority of victims would appear to have been in the prime of life (which invites comparisons with earlier plagues) and well-to-do. Indeed, it would have appeared to have targeted the prosperous in particular. It was also more marked in the open countryside than densely populated towns. The aetiology continues to avoid explanation, but Adam Patrick quotes from the suggestion of a certain Dr. R. Willan in 1808 that the cause of the malady may have been “some form of ... food poisoning”, possibly “some disease or deprivation in wheat, or some noxious vegetable growing with it in particular situations.”⁽¹⁴⁾

Among the miracles attributed to Henry VI between 1481 and 1500 there are several references to the disease, including the death

from the sweat (“plaga pestiferi sudoris infecta”) of a fourteen-year old girl and her miraculous resuscitation in the sixth year of Henry VII.⁽¹⁵⁾ Patrick also refers to a number of deaths in the household of Henry VIII, including that of Cardinal Wolsey.⁽¹⁶⁾ Henry’s private secretary, the scholar Ammonius of Lucca, who died in 1517, was probably a victim and one of the few foreigners to succumb.⁽¹⁷⁾ Dean Colet of St. Pauls, who died in 1519 was another notable victim ; he died of three successive attacks of, as his friend Erasmus noted, “a disease which is particularly rife in England.”⁽¹⁸⁾ That the phenomenon returned in Shakespeare’s time is suggested by the reference that Mistress Overdone makes in *Measure for Measure* (see the quotation which prefaces this paper).

The prayer contained in Keio Univ. MS 120x. 432.1 is twelve lines long and is addressed to “beatissime Marie Virginis”, popularly invoked in times of sickness and plague.⁽¹⁹⁾ It invokes the image of the Lord in agony on the Mount of Olives (“... in monte olivetti ...”) and is all the more poignant for the fact that, as Whyllie and Collier state, there was “a high incidence of English sweating sickness among monks, even female religious, before 1551, by which time the monasteries had been dissolved.”⁽²⁰⁾ It can be safely assumed that the “sudore tristi” referred to in the prayer is that of the earliest attack, 1485. What became of the monk that penned the prayer we can only surmise, but it is wholly appropriate that a prayer of this kind should be appended to a collection of this sort, given the other content of the manuscript (the medical guidance of the pseudo-Aristotelian encyclopedic *Secretum*, for instance), and the healing background associated with the fourteenth-century saint St. Bridget of Sweden (d. July, 1372 at the age of seventy) after whom the abbey was founded (Syon was the only

religious house in the country dedicated to St. Bridget). She had built a hospital with her husband (d. 1344) and they both tended the sick with their own hands. Carole Rawcliffe notes that “one of the much-loved prayers of St. Bridget of Sweden ... invoked Jesus, the ‘heavenly leche’, and his tormented body as sure protection against the contagion of sin.” In 1415 Henry V established a Carthusian monastery (“The House of Jesus of Bethlehem of Sheen”) on the north bank of the Thames not far from his palace at Richmond, in Middlesex, and a Brigittine house, “the Monastery of St. Saviour and St. Bridget of Sion” or “Mount Sion of Sheen,”⁽²¹⁾ across the river from Sheen in the park of Twickenham, part of the manor of Iselworth. In 1431 the institution moved further down the river to the sight now occupied by Syon House. Syon Abbey became a centre and standard-bearer of renewed Monasticism, of mystical piety and extreme feminists. It was to this new monastery that the mystic Margery Kempe went at Lammas-tide, probably in the year 1434.⁽²²⁾ By all accounts Syon contained a fine library built up by the Brigittine nuns and the scholars they recruited as confessors, and contained several copies of the *Imitation of Christ* translated by the resident Richard Witford, friend of Thomas More and Erasmus, along with popular devotional manuals like Hilton’s *Scale of Perfection*.⁽²³⁾ Between 1500 and the dissolution of Syon in 1539 many instructional works were written and printed there in the vernacular, among them Witford’s early sixteenth-century death treatise *A Daily Exercise and Experience of Death*.⁽²⁴⁾

The apt juxtaposition of the prayer to the *De Pomo* should also be noted, the latter a purported deathbed dialogue, modelled on the *Phaedo*, between Aristotle and his disciples, which contemplates death, fear of dying, and the supreme value of philosophy as a way to eternal salvation. In the first section Aristotle, dying from some “fatal disease”

Oratio contra infirmitate sudoris

Sub tua protectionem confugimus. Esi infirmum
acceperunt veniem et propter hoc tibi passim
dei genitrix vgo. Ora pro nobis beata mater
xpi. ut liberemur in presenti a sudore tristi. etc.

Dne ihu xpe qui nostrarum animarum pro salute
in monte oliveti genibus flexis. sudorem
effudisti concede propitius ut tuae dulcissime
matris. interventu a magno sudoris specie
pestifera saluemur. Ut omnes tibi suppliciter
sudoris infirmitate vexati pro virtute
beatissime marie vginis celebriter liberentur
per xpm dnm nostrum Amen

is warned against talking lest the resultant “body-heat” interfere with a drug that has been administered to him, a warning which Aristotle dismisses, as discourse is so vital to him. In Birkenmajer the *Secreta Secretorum* is bound with the *De Pomo*⁽²⁵⁾ in twenty manuscripts, preceding it eight times and immediately following it in three others.⁽²⁶⁾

Oratio contra infirmitatem sudoris.

Sub tuam protectionem confugimus ubi infirmi
acceperunt virtutem et propter hoc tibi psallimus
dei genetrix virgo : “ora per nobis beata mater
Christi ut liberemur in praesentia sudore tristi” : oremus.

Domine I[es] hu Christe qui nostrarum animarum pro salute
in monte oliveti genibus flexis, sudorem
effudisti concede propitius, ut tuae dulcissimae
matris interventu a magni sudoris specie
pestifera salvemur, omnes tibi supplicantes
sudoris infirmitate ut vexati per virtutem
beatissime Marie Virginis celebriter liberentur
per Christum dominum nostrum Amen.

NOTES

I acknowledge a great debt to Associate Professor Neil McLynn, Faculty of Law, Keio University, for his advice and assistance in transcribing the prayer from the manuscript, and to Professor T. Takamiya for drawing my attention to it in the first place.

- (1) See John R. Eastman, ed. *Aegidius Romanus, De Renunciatione Pape* (Texts and Studies in Religion Vol. 52) (N. Y. : Edwin Mellen, 1992), p. 365.

- (2) For a translation see M. F. Rousseau, *The Apple or Aristotle's Death* (Wisconsin : Marquette Univ. Press, 1968).
- (3) W. S. C. Copeman, *Doctors and Disease in Tudor Times* (London : 1960), p. 126.
- (4) Robert S. Gottfried, *The Black Death* (N. Y. : 1983), p. 157.
- (5) John A. H. Wylie and Leslie H. Collier, "The English Sweating Sickness (Sudor Anglicus) : A Reappraisal." *Journal of the History of Medicine* 36 : October 1881. pp. 425-45 ; 429-30.
- (6) See Paul Slack, *The Impact of Plague in Tudor and Stuart England* (London, 1985). Other incidents recorded include 1507-8, 1517, 1528, with a later epidemic in north-west Europe in 1529-30.
- (7) Adam Patrick, "A Consideration of the Nature of the English Sweating Sickness." *Medical History* 9, 1965, p. 273.
- (8) John F. Drew Shrewsbury, *A History of the Bubonic Plague in the British Isles* (Cambridge, 1970), p. 154.
- (9) See 3rd Series. VI. Oct. 8, 1864, p. 299 ; 3rd Series. XI. April 5, 1879, p. 275; 6th Series, IX. May 10, 1884, p. 377; 6th Series, IX. June 28, 1884, p. 510; and X, July 19, 1884, p. 58.
- (10) "... a litil boke the whiche traytied and rehersed many gode hinges necessarie for the... Pestilence... made by the... Bisshop of Arusiens or rather by Joannes Jacobi..." (London : c. 1485). According to Wyler and Collier (p. 427) however, it was *Tractus contra pestilentia the nasomonem et dissenterium* of 1490 which chronicles the 1485 attack, written by the French physician Dr. Thomas Forrestier, possibly at the request of Henry VII. Dr. John Caius wrote of the last epidemic, in Shrewsbury, 1551, "the first clinical monograph in the English language" according to Copeman, p. 127.
- (11) J. B. Steane, ed. Thomas Nashe, *The Unfortunate Traveller and Other Works* (Harmondsworth, 1972), p. 273.
- (12) Gottfried, p. 158.
- (13) Slack, p. 70.
- (14) Patrick, p. 278.
- (15) R. Knox and S. Leslie, eds. *The Miracles of Henry VI* (London, 1923) no. 145: p. 194.
- (16) Wolsey died in 1530 after being arrested for high treason. His death has been attributed to the Sweat, but Wylie and Collier question this assumption (p. 431).

- (17) F. C. Hecker, trans. B. G. Babington, *Epidemics of the Middle Ages* (London : 1859), p. 184.
- (18) R. A. B. Mynors and Peter G. Bietenholz, eds. *The Correspondence of Erasmus. Letters*[1122 - 1251. 1520 - 1521] (Toronto Univ., 1988), p. 237.
- (19) See, for examples, E. Hoskins, ed. *Horæ Beatæ Mariæ Virginis* (or *Sarum & York Primers*), (London, 1901).
- (20) Wylie and Collier, p. 437. They cite the example of nuns at a convent at Wilton, July 1528.
- (21) Carole Rawcliffe, *Medicine and Society in Later Medieval England* (Alan Sutton : 1995), p. 18.
- (22) Sanford Brown Meech, ed. *The Book of Margery Kempe*, EETS os 212 (1940) Vol. I, pp. 348-49.
- (23) Colin Platt, *The Abbeys and Priories of Medieval England* (London : 1984), p. 184.
- (24) Marie Collins, "A Little Known 'Art of Dying' By a Brigittine of Syon: A Daily Exercise and Experience of Death by Richard Whitford" in Jane Taylor, ed. *Dies Illa : Death in the Middle Ages* (Francis Cairns : 1984), pp. 179-193.
- (25) There are some ninety or more recorded manuscripts containing the work. See Rousseau p. 11. The manuscript owned by Keio University Library is recorded in *Bibliotheca Britannico-Hibernica* (London : 1768) : "Johannis de Drayton Tabula super Aegidium de regimine principum, Ms. olim in Monast. Sion." However, it does not feature in C. B. Schmitt and Dilwyn Knox, *Pseudo-Aristoteles Latinus : Warburg Institute Surveys and Texts XII* (London : Warburg Institute, 1985).
- (26) Alexandre Birkenmajer, *Classment des ouvrages attribués à Aristote par le moyen âge Latin* (Cracovie : Imprimerie de l'Université de Cracovie, 1932), pp. 10-11.