

**MEDICAL LORE IN THE OLDER
ENGLISH DRAMATISTS AND
POETS (EXCLUSIVE OF
SHAKESPEARE)**

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Medical Lore in the Older English Dramatists and Poets (exclusive of Shakespeare) by Robert Fletcher

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ROBERT FLETCHER

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READ BEFORE THE
HISTORICAL CLUB OF THE JOHNS HOPKINS HOSPITAL,
MAY 13, 1895.

BY

ROBERT FLETCHER, M. D.

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MEDICAL LORE
IN THE OLDER ENGLISH DRAMATISTS AND POETS
(EXCLUSIVE OF SHAKESPEARE).*

BY ROBERT FLETCHER, M. D.

Upon hearing the title of this paper it may, perhaps, excite your surprise that Shakespeare should be specifically excluded from the list of authors, since his plays abound in allusions to medical matters. But everything relating to the special lines of knowledge of that unequalled writer has been so thoroughly investigated, every allusion to medicine, law, religion, folk-lore, flowers, birds or animals, has been so worked into essay or book, that there is nothing which could now be said that would not seem trite or stale. There is half a column of references to the literature treating of medicine in Shakespeare in the Index Catalogue of the National Medical Library, and still there comes from time to time some journal from the Far West—an Oklahoma Medical Clarion, perchance—with the familiar title in its table of contents of "Shakespeare's medical knowledge," or "Remarks on Hamlet's madness from a psychological standpoint."

In the course of a somewhat miscellaneous reading, aside from professional studies, it has been my custom through many years to copy passages relating to medical subjects, and it is from the rather opulent collection which has been thus formed that I have selected some readings for to-night, which I trust may be found novel and entertaining and possessed of some interest from a historical point of view. It is difficult

* Read before the Historical Club of the Johns Hopkins Hospital, May 13, 1895.

to put such disjointed material into any workmanlike shape, and you will kindly make allowance for the species of mosaic work submitted to you. It would be an easy matter to take an author's works, or a single play, and read out all the medical allusions to be found therein, but I have thought it better to select certain subjects to be illustrated by quotations. The first subject will be the condition of medicine generally in what is termed the Elizabethan period, and the estimation in which its practitioners were held by the people; next, early references to the venereal disease and its treatment, and lastly, some miscellaneous curiosities of therapeutics and the like. I shall not trouble you with extracts relating to *materia medica* merely; they are very numerous, and one division of the subject, which I may term the Witches' Pharmacopœia, and which is extremely curious, would alone occupy the canonical hour of your evening.

It is perhaps not an unfair test of the popular repute in which a profession is held to observe how its members figure in the novels and plays of the period. Certainly in the works of the great novelists of our own time the doctor appears in a most admirable light. He may be eccentric, but is always benevolent, and sometimes skillful beyond the power of attainment of any living physician. Judged by this standard, the average doctor of the sixteenth century was a compound of ignorance and knavery, with an occasional dash of pedantry. In all the literature of the period in question I cannot call to mind a decided instance to the contrary. If he be not a charlatan or a pedant he is merely a lay-figure in a doctor's gown and cap, like the physician in *Macbeth*.

In 1629 there was published in London a curious volume entitled: "Micro-cosmographie, or a piece of the world discovered in essays and characters." It was an anonymous production, but the author was Dr. John Earle, afterward Bishop of Salisbury. Among his "characters" he has a physician and surgeon, and it must be admitted that they are not models of ethical conduct. Of the physician he says:

"His practice is some businesse at bed-sides, and his speculation an Urinall. Hee is distinguisht from an Empericke by a round velvet cap, and Doctors gowne, yet no man takes degrees more superfluously, for he is Doctor howsoever. He

is sworne to *Galen* and *Hippocrates*, as University men to their statutes, though they never saw them, and his discourse is all Aphorisms, though his reading be onely *Alexis* of Piemont, or the Regiment of Health. The best cure he ha's done is upon his own purse, which from a leane sickliness he hath made lusty, and in flesh. His learning consists much in reckoning up the hard names of diseases, and the superscriptions of Gallypots in his Apothecaries Shoppe, which are rank't in his shelves and the Doctors memory. He is indeed only languag'd in diseases, and speakes Greeke many times when he knows not. If he have beene but a by-stander at some desperate recovery, he is slandered with it, though he be guiltlesse; and this breeds his reputation, and that his Practice; for his skill is meerly opinion. Of all odors he likes best the smell of Urine, and holds *Vespations* rule, that no gaine is unsavory. If you send this once to him, you must resolve to be sick howsoever, for he will never leave examining your Water till hee have shakt it into a disease. Then follows a writ to his druggier in a strange tongue, which hee understands though he cannot conster. If he see you himselfe, his presence is the worst visitation; for if he cannot heale your sickness, he will be sure to helpe it. Hee translates his Apothecaries Shop into your Chamber, and the very Windowes and benches must take Phisicke."

As a rule, the physician of those times was a more flourishing man than the surgeon. There are proverbial expressions which indicate the general prosperity of the former. In a play by George Chapman, *All Fools*, 1605, III, 1, there is such an instance:

Heaven, heaven, I see these politicians
 (Out of blind fortune's hands) are our most fools.
 'Tis she that gives the lustre to their wits,
 Still plodding at traditional devices;
 But take 'em out of them to present actions,
 A man may grope and tickle 'em like a trout,
 And take 'em from their close dear holes as fat
 As a physician.

Of the surgeon he says:

"A Surgeon is one that has some business about his Building or little house of man, whereof Nature is as it were the

Tyler, and hee the Playsterer. It is offer out of reparations than an old Parsonage, and then he is set on worke to patch it againe. Hee deales most with broken Commodities, as a broken Head, or a mangled face, and his gaines are very ill got, for he lives by the hurts of the Common-wealth. He differs from a Physitian as a sore do's from a disease, or the sicke from those that are not whole, the one distempers you within, and the other blisters you without. He complains of the decay of Valour in these daies, and sighes for that slashing Age of Sword and Buckler; and thinkes the Law against Duels was made meerly to wound his Vocation. Hee had beene long since undone, if the charitie of the Stewes had not relieved him, from whom he ha's his Tribute as duely as the Pope, or a wind-fall sometimes from a Taverne, if a quart Pot hit right. The rareness of his custome mak[e]s him pittillesse when it comes: and he holds a Patient longer than our Courts a Cause. Hee tells you what danger you had beene in if he had staide but a minute longer, and though it be but a prickt finger, hee makes of it much matter."

Beaumont and Fletcher frequently introduce medical consultations in their plays, and "a physician" or "a surgeon" is nearly always to be found in the persons of the drama. It must be admitted, however, that those great writers had no admiration for the medical men of their time. They represent them either as pretenders or pedants, and they are held up to ridicule accordingly. In the play of *Monsieur Thomas*, 1639, II, 1, Francesco is taken with a fainting fit, and is cared for at first by his friends. One of them, Valentine, says:

Come, lead him in; he shall to bed; a vomit,
I'll have a vomit for him.

Alice. A purge first;
And if he breath'd a vein—

Val. No, no, no bleeding;
A clyster will cool all.

In scene 4 the same patient is the subject of a consultation:

Enter three physicians with an urinal.

First Phys. A pleurisy I see it.

Sec. Phys. I rather hold it
For tremor cordis.

- Third Phys.* Do you mark the fœces?
 'Tis a most pestilent contagious fever;
 A surfeit, a plaguy surfeit; he must bleed.
- First Phys.* By no means.
- Third Phys.* I say, bleed.
- First Phys.* I say 'tis dangerous,
 The person being spent so much beforehand,
 And nature drawn so low; clysters, cool clysters.
- Sec. Phys.* Now, with your favours, I should think a vomit,
 For take away the cause, the effect must follow;
 The stomach's foul and furr'd, the pot's unphlegm'd
 yet.
- Third Phys.* No, no, we'll rectify that part by mild means;
 Nature so sunk must find no violence.

The third doctor, who proposes bleeding, objects to the emetic as a violent remedy. The expression that "the pot's unphlegm'd yet" would appear to mean that no phlegm appearing in the pot, it was to be supposed still in the stomach.

In the next act, Francesco, whose sole complaint is hapless love, is discovered in bed, the three physicians, reinforced by an apothecary, endeavoring to apply their remedies.

- First Phys.* Clap on the cataplasm.
- Francesco.* Good gentlemen—
- Sec. Phys.* And see those broths there
 Ready within this hour.—Pray keep your arms in.
 The air is raw, and ministers much evil.
- Fran.* Pray, leave me; I beseech ye, leave me, gentlemen;
 I have no other sickness but your presence;
 Convey your cataplasms to those that need 'em,
 Your vomits, and your clysters.
- Third Phys.* Pray, be rul'd, Sir.
- First Phys.* Bring in the lettuce-cap.—You must be shav'd, Sir,
 And then how suddenly we'll make you sleep.

The commentators have discussed in their ponderous manner the meaning of the "lettuce-cap" in the foregoing passage. They suggest a lettuce or lattice cap, one of open work, which is absurd; there was a fur, too, called letice, but this would not cool the heated head. There is no doubt that lettuce leaves were applied to the shaven head as an appropriate remedy; the hypnotic effect of the plant was much vaunted in those times. Its use, as well as that of its active principle,

lactucarium, has gone by, but in country places in England a like treatment is still employed, and plantain leaves or a cabbage leaf with the morning dew on it is thought to be cooling to the head of a delirious person.

There is a play by Middleton, *A Fair Quarrel*, 1613, IV, 2, in which a surgeon is introduced, whose obstinate pedantry is amusingly contrasted with the impatient anger of the patient's sister. The Colonel lies wounded on his bed. His sister begins the interview:

Col.'s Sist. Come hither, honest surgeon, and deal faithfully with a distressed virgin; what hope is there?

Surgeon. Hope? chilia was scap'd miraculously, lady.

Col.'s Sist. What's that, sir?

Surg. Cava vena; I care but little for his wound i' th' cesophag, not thus much, trust me; but when they come to diaphragma once, the small intestines, or the spinal medul, or i' th' roots of the emunctories of the noble parts, then straight I fear a syncope; the flanks retiring towards the back, the urine bloody, the excrements purulent, and the dolour pricking or pungent.

Col.'s Sist. Alas, I'm ne'er the better for this answer.

Surg. Now I must tell you his principal dolour lies i' th' region of the liver, and there's both inflammation and tumefaction feared; marry, I make him a quadrangular plumation, where I used sanguis draconis, by my faith, with powders incarnative, which I tempered with oil of hypericon, and other liquors mundificative.

Col.'s Sist. Pox a' your mundies frigatives! I would they were all fired!

Surg. But I purpose, lady, to make another experiment at next dressing with a sarcotic medicament made of iris of Florence; thus, mastic, calaphena, opoponax, sarcocolla—

Col.'s Sist. Sarco-halter! what comfort is i' this to a poor gentlewoman? Pray tell me in plain terms what you think of him?

Surg. Marry, in plain terms I do not know what to say to him; the wound, I can assure you, inclines to paralism, and I find his body cacochymic; being then in fear of fever and inflammation, I nourish him altogether with viands refrigerative, and give for potion the juice of savicola dissolved with water cerefolium; I could do no more, lady, if his best ginglymus were dis severed.
—[Exit.

It seems the wound required to be twice cauterized; the Surgeon says, Act V, 1:

Marry, I must tell you the wound was fain to be twice corroded; 'twas a plain gastrolophe, and a deep one; but I closed the lips on't with bandages and sutures, which is a kind conjunction of the parts separated against the course of nature.