

SHAKESPEARE'S RHEUMATOLOGY

BY

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The works of Shakespeare are a rich lode to mine for Elizabethan views of the world. His plays were popular, so we may assume that the playgoers understood the conceits and references. If the vocabulary is more flamboyant than that in general use today, it only reflects a more elegant language. When, as is frequent, Shakespeare employs medical terms, he owes much to the philosophy of humoral pathogenesis.

"Rheumatic diseases" were not then necessarily afflictions only of the supporting structures, but included pleurisy and other disorders for which alterations in the bodily humours could be blamed. "Rheum" and "rheumatic" were used both for the watery discharge due to lachrimation*, salivation, or the common cold, and for the excess of synovial fluid which caused swollen joints.

In general, dampness and wet weather were associated—then as now—with the cause of rheumatic diseases (as T. J. MacLagan was to think in the late 19th century, when he sought and found salicylate in plants growing in swampy surroundings):

TITANIA: The winds . . . have suck'd up from the sea
Contagious fogs . . .
Therefore the moon, the governess of
floods,
Pale in her anger washes all the air
That rheumatic diseases do abound.
A Midsummer Night's Dream, I, ii.

PAGE: And youthful still
In your doublet and hose, this raw
rheumatic day.
Merry Wives of Windsor, III, i.

Thus the idea that anything rheumatic could be dry was a comical malapropism:

HOSTESS: As rheumatic as two dry toasts.
Henry IV, pt 2, II, iv.

* HOSTESS (describing the death of Falstaff):
But then he was rheumatic (*i.e.* tearful) and talked of the whore of
Babylon.

Henry V, II, iii.

Old age was regarded as a cause of rheumatism, with pain, stiffness, and deformity:

Were I hard favoured, foul, or wrinkled-old
. . . O'erworn, desipèd, rheumatic, and cold . . .
Venus and Adonis, I, 135.

GAUNT: And thy unkindness be like crookèd age.
Richard II, II, i.

GUIDERIUS: If quiet life be best; well corresponding
With your stiff age.
Cymbeline, III, iii.

PROSPERO: The foul witch Sycorax, who with age and
envy
Was grown into a hoop.
Tempest, I, ii.

GONZALO: I can go no further, sir; my old bones ache
Tempest, III, iii.

There was no known relief for arthritic pain:

KING HENRY: Canst thou, when thou commandst the
beggar's knee,
Command the health of it?
Henry V, IV, i.

Some cruel curses wish irreversible anguish upon
their victim:

APEMANTUS: Aches contract and starve your supple
joints.
Timon of Athens, I, i.

This image is the only one that suggests rheumatoid arthritis, known until the recent past as atrophic arthritis. At other times Shakespeare obviously has degenerative joint disease (osteo-arthritis) in mind:

PROSPERO: I'll rack thee with old cramps,
Fill all thy bones with aches and make
thee roar.

Tempest, I, ii.

PROSPERO: Go charge my goblins that they grind their joints
With dry convulsions, shorten up their sinews
With agèd cramps.

Tempest, IV, i.

The term "sciatica" was also used for arthritic affliction, particularly of the lower limbs:

TIMON: . . . thou cold sciatica
Cripple our senators, that their limbs may halt
As lamely as their manners.

Timon of Athens, IV, i.

FIRST GENTLEMAN: How now! which of your hips has the most profound sciatica?
Measure for Measure, I, ii.

This last phrase, spoken in a sporting-house context, implies that arthritis and venereal disease are somehow related. When gout is also confused with venereal disease, one wonders whether the syphilis of those days produced marked joint involvement or whether arthritis was misdiagnosed as a syphilitic sequel.

FALSTAFF: . . . A pox of this gout! or, a gout of this pox! for the one or the other plays the rogue with my great toe. It is no great matter if I do halt; I shall have the wars for my colour, and my pension shall seem the more reasonable. A good wit will make use of anything. I will turn diseases to commodity.

Henry IV, Pt 2, I, ii.

One can imagine the registrar entering the notation DNEPTE (did not exist prior to enlistment), the modern American reference to service-incurred disability. Falstaff suggests that gout and pox (syphilis, also known as Great Pox, to distinguish it from the Small Pox, or White Plague in contradistinction to Black Plague) cause similar lesions. He had already voiced the same idea earlier in this scene:

FALSTAFF: A man can no more separate age and covetousness than he can part young limbs and lechery; but the gout galls the one, and the pox pinches the other.
Henry IV, Pt 2, I, ii.

Age, gluttony, overimbibition—all share complicity in the development of gout.

ORLANDO: Who ambles Time withal?
ROSALIND: With a priest that lacks Latin and a rich man that hath not gout; for the one sleeps easily because he cannot study; and the other lives merrily because he feels no pain; the one lacking the burden of lean and wasteful learning, the other knowing no burden of heavy tedious penury. These Time ambles withal.

As You Like It, III, ii.

That colchicine had not yet been rediscovered is proved by the following reference to gout as incurable:

POSTHUMUS: Most welcome, bondage! for thou art a way,
I think, to liberty. Yet am I better
Than one that's sick o' th' gout; since he
Had rather groan so in perpetuity than be
Cur'd by th' sure physician death, who is
The key t'unbar these locks.

Cymbeline, V, iv.

One is reminded of Sydney Smith's quip: "When I have gout, I feel as if I am walking on my eyeballs!"

All in all, the arthritic was an object of derision or contempt—helpless, racked with pain, suspect of venery or sensuality, and without hope of cure:

GLOUCESTER: Some tardy cripple bore the countermand
That came too late to see him buried.

Richard III, II, i.

CHORUS: And chide the cripple tardy-gaited night
Who, like a foul and ugly witch, doth limp
So tediously away.

Henry V, IV, prologue.

But, then again, have popular lay concepts really advanced much further today?



Shakespeare's rheumatology.

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