
Against Gout

Introduction

A wealth of medical literature survives in Old English, distributed across six major collections: *Bald's Leechbook* and *Leechbook III* relay medical learning going back to Latin and Greek sources; the *Herbarium*, *Peri didaxeon*, and *Medicina de quadrupedibus* are translations of known Latin collections (with some additional sources in the case of the *Herbarium*); and *Lacnunga* is a collection of remedies many of which may be classified as charms, i.e. instructions for sympathetic magic, not all of which have a medical object.

Scholars have traditionally distinguished between two classes of healing remedy. If a treatment is credibly applied to the site of the ailment, it qualifies as medicine; if not, it counts as magic. The distinction aids the modern understanding of medieval practices, but we shouldn't automatically assume it was recognized in quite the same way in the Middle Ages. A clue to its validity is nevertheless provided in the works of Ælfric of Eynsham, famously orthodox in his beliefs, who offers a distinction that may be considered analogous. In one of his homilies, Ælfric condemns the practice of timing one's voyages according to the lunar cycle (the implication being that some days were considered lucky and others unlucky, as surviving texts bear witness), but he nevertheless maintains that wood is strongest if

cut at full moon, because it is in the nature of all created things to be strongest at this time.¹ Though not applied to medicine, the latter belief more convincingly passes the test of credible causality than the former, even if it too might be considered pseudoscience today.

Though full-body baths are not a topical treatment in any exact sense of the word, it is easy to see how they count as credible remedies against gout. The added element of animal cruelty is not a common element of early English medicine, but it serves as a reminder that a treatment does not have to be effective in every (or any) respect in order to count as medicine.

Manuscript

London, British Library, MS Cotton Vitellius C iii, fol. 77v (s. xi¹)

Text

(1) Wið liþadle: (2) genim cwicenne fox and seoð þæt þa ban ane beon læfed. (3) Astige þærin gelomlice, and in oþer bæð; (4) do he swa swiþe oft. (5) Wundorlice hit hæleþ, (6) and æghwylce gear e þys fultum he him sceal gegearwian. (7) And ele do þærto ðonne he hine seoðe, (8) and his þyssum gemete to þearfe bruce.

¹*Catholic Homilies* I, 6 (ed. Clemons, pp. 229–230).

Notes

3 **gestige**: The subjunctive form of the verb is explained by the pronoun in (4), which should here be inferred.