John Hall’s Little Book of Cures: A New Translation

John Hall, physician in Stratford upon Avon (c.1607 – 1635), made a selection of 178 of his cases towards the end of his life. This was acquired after his death by James Cook, a surgeon, who translated Hall’s ‘so abbreviated or false’ Latin and published them in 1657. The availability of Cooke’s text and Hall’s Shakespeare connexion (his son-in-law) has made it a popular reference work.

My research

Comparison of the texts reveals that Cooke was an active editor, expanding some elements and leaving out others.

My plan, a joint project in the Centre for the History of Medicine and the Centre for Renaissance Studies, is to produce a new and complete translation of Hall’s notes.

A page from Hall’s notes on his treatment of the Countess of Northamptonshire in 1622

The Countess had fainted in her bedroom and injured her face on the floor. Hall treated this with local ointment applications, and vigorous purging.

He also suspected an underlying scurvy which he treated although she had no symptoms – a relatively new approach at this time. Cooke omitted his explanation for this.

Further on, Hall prescribed herbs boiled in five gallons of beer. Cook added that this should be ‘until one be wasted’.

The Same in Cook’s Translation

A Preliminary Translation of Part of the Same

‘Her body not being adequately purged, she was purged again with very good effect with the following pills: Take: of Rufus’s pills, and Crato’s amber, equal quantities of each. Of one dram make 7 pills. I ordered three to be swallowed at bed time [but what was strange, she chewed them. She said she was never able to swallow a pill, even a small one]. She took them very well twice a week, each following day [giving] six or seven stools. On the other days she used Crato’s chalybeate electuary with salt of scurvy-grass and wormwood and coral. She chewed all three of the above-mentioned pills at night without aversion or nausea. These antiscorbutic herbs were mixed in a broth (for antiscorbutic medicines should always be mixed with others when there is any suspicion of scurvy) – scurvy-grass, brooklime, watercress, bugloss and others of the same sort.’

Future Plans

Once the translation is completed, I shall provide a commentary putting it in the context of medical practice at the time, and comparing Hall’s original with Cook’s translation, to see what factors might have influenced his editorial decisions.

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1 British Library, Egerton MS 2065, The Casebook of Dr John Hall, ca.1635.


3 With thanks to Dr David Lines for guidance with the translation.