

2011 International Symposium on Poetry and Medicine

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ABSTRACT



References to ENT Syphilitic Disease in 16th Century Poetry

Author: John Riddington Young, FRCS

The actual term Syphilis, is derived from the title of a poem written in 1530 by the Italian physician, Girolamo Fracastoro, hailed as the "Father of Germ Medicine" and who later in 1547 wrote "de Contagionis". During the 16th Century the disease was called the Morbus Gallicus and was ravaging Europe. The public was terrified of it and therefore poets wrote about it - and usually in dramatic terms. William Dunbar the Scottish poet devotes an entire poem to the Spanish Pox. Shakespeare calls it either the malady of France or the Neapolitan disease and gives around twenty references to it. A 19th century medical historian credits the bard with writing one of the most complete contemporary descriptions of the disease. He certainly gives us vivid images of syphilitic nasal disease in Timon of Athens and Othello. He also gives reference to laryngeal and oral forms of the disease. Edmund Spenser in the Faery Queen gives a wonderful description of Syphilis, saying that it is caused by lechery and calling it

"That fowle eville which all men reprove
That rots the marrow and consumes the braine."

Sir John Davies wrote two poems 'dedicated to whores', and describes nasal syphilis in them both. He also describes a very unusual form of treatment by tobacco (both syphilis and tobacco had been thought to have come from the New World). Poetical allusions to the more usual form of mercurial treatment are also presented in "A lifetime of Mercury for One Moment of Venus".