Of Plagues and Foreign Influences: Johann Vochs, *De pestilentia* (1507)

Abstract

With this early sixteenth-century plague treatise, Johann Vochs became one of the first physicians to espouse localism in medical treatments. He argued that German bodies needed to be treated with German medicines and likewise needed to be protected from foreign substances and ideas. (He considered Italian influences to be particularly pernicious). Vochs' medical treatise was similar to contemporaneous historical and linguistic scholarship in that it helped establish a specifically "German" identity largely by distinguishing "Germany" from Italy/Rome.

Source

Chapter 13: Mostly on Protective Measures, with Some Necessary Rules.

First rule: The bodies of Germanic people do well under extreme humidity, and they are protected by humid conditions. This is because all things keep well in places connatural to them, and they are nourished by foods of the same constitution as those which nurtured their generation in the first place. Our land is cold and humid, and therefore it generates phlegm and blood, and thus not even cholera afflicts us as it does to Italians, Gauls, and other peoples. Also melancholia does not thrive in our bodies, unless it occurs in one who became Italicized, living according to their customs, eating their greasy and unhealthy food, and tormenting himself with fasts and vigils as religious people do; among those melancholia would thrive, but according to nature's way, one would find fewer melancholics in Germania than in Italy. That is why grave errors are committed by those physicians who follow the Italians sheeplike, not only prescribing alteratives, but even laxatives, purging humors that need no such treatment, and thereby bringing the patients to perdition and death. There is hardly a saying by the most excellent Hippocrates so worth repeating as this: "If the matters that are purged are ones that should be purged, then it will be beneficial and easily borne; if on the contrary they need not be purged, then it will be wrong and ill-advised." Read and turn the pages of Hippocrates twice: he barely ever repeats himself, but this aphorism occurs five times, lest it would slip the physician's mind. And do observe that all those who practice medicine in this way shall never succeed in their cures, unless occasionally and only by chance. Which is why Hippocrates rightly continued, "Some value must be conceded to the country, to the season, and to age."

But we intended to speak about alteratives and protective measures, and now we have been sidetracked.

— Because our bodies absorb humidity in great measure, practicing physicians ought not to apply too much Armenian clay or other medicinal earthen substances, especially during this plague and the wintery season, or on a cold complexion. It would indeed be greatly wrong if they acted otherwise. The reason is that these dry and cold [earthen substances], multiplied in bodies that are by nature humid, will necessarily at first repress the humidities and cause distensions and constipation. And constipation produces putrefaction, as putrefaction then produces the plague, being its antecedent cause. Now, a quack would argue that because the bodies of Germanic people are humid, they are therefore in more need of drying, since contraries are cured by contraries, and that this is why Armenian clay and other medicinal earths are among the most appropriate medicines. And yet this argument does not stand, since you know well, you quack, the third aphorism of Mesuë Damascenus: "The remedy should be made in concordance with the natural forces at play, and not just according to what seems helpful without a clear reasoning." For a dry organ is made whole by a drier remedy, and a humid one by the opposite, as Galen says

repeatedly in his *De ingenio*. You also know that there exists "a suitable complexion for each ethnic group, when a comparison is made between this and that climate or air. The body of an Indian, if it were treated somehow according to the complexion of a Slav, would either fall ill or die, and vice versa (Avicenna, *Canon* I, *fen* 1). And you know that those who inhabit northern lands are more humid, as are those whose work has to do with water (as is said *ibid.*, as above). So tell me: in what way does it benefit or how does it affect one dram of Armenian clay mixed with one pound of phlegm? Will it not dry it out over a period of time? And what would it then do to a pound of humid matter? You say that it will preserve it from putrefaction, because it is proper of what is cold and dry not to putrefy. But you are wrong, quack, and you are like a newborn child who ignores that the expanse of the world goes beyond its house or beyond what he can see with his eyes. You will never remove humidity from the bodies of Germanic people with this artifice; you will rather generate putrefaction with this delusion of yours, for the reasons explained above, because you will be repressing the humor, and as time advances the humor will decompose badly and become entrenched in every crevice of the now weakened body; this is how it becomes the cause of the generation of carbuncles or other malignant ulcers.

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Source: Johann Vochs, *De pestilentia Anni p*[*raese*]*ntis et ei*[*us*] *cura : ad illustrissimu*[*m*] *Principem et d*[*omi*]*n*[*u*]*m, d*[*omi*]*n*[*u*]*m Fredericum Sacri Imperij Electorem, Ducem Saxoniae &c. Cum quibusdam dubijs et digressionibus sine quibus cura non perficitur / eximij viri Joha*[*n*]*nis Vochs de Colonia, Artium et medicine Doctoris acuratissimi feliciter incipit*. Magdeburge: Winter, 1507, no pagination. Available online at: https://mdz-nbn-resolving.de/details:bsb11219689

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