

## PRESCRIPTION AND DEVOTION: THE REVEREND DOCTOR DONNE AND THE LEARNED DOCTOR MAYERNE—TWO SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY RECORDS OF EPIDEMIC TYPHUS FEVER

by

KATE FROST\*

IN THE LATE autumn of 1623, the poet John Donne, then Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral, contracted typhus which was sweeping London in epidemic.<sup>1</sup> For almost three weeks Donne suffered a near-mortal fever, visited by his physicians and nursed by a few faithful servants. More fortunate than many, Donne did not die of the disease, and by early January, confined to a chair by his bedside, he had begun putting together the recollections of his ordeal in a book entitled *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions and Severall Steps in my Sicknes*,<sup>2</sup> which was published and in his readers' hands long before Donne himself returned to his public ministerial life. The book is divided into twenty-three segments, each of which describes a stage of the illness. Each of these segments, in turn, is divided into a Meditation, an Expostulation, and a Prayer. Donne's *Devotions* is an attempt to translate the course of an illness into a spiritual progress of the soul toward reconciliation with God. But, more than that, it is a unique record of the progress and treatment of typhus fever.

The typhus epidemic of 1623/24 in England was a severe one, stemming from the *morbus castrensis* or *morbus Hungaricus* which had struck the army of Maximilian II in Hungary in 1618 and had from thence spread over Europe under the various names of *pestis bellicus*, *Typhus bellicus*, *febris castrensis*, or *febris militaris*.<sup>3</sup> In London, the onslaught was severe: the death toll was later estimated at 8,000,<sup>4</sup> and the noted Jacobean letter-writer Sir John Chamberlain noted deaths among the aristocracy from the spotted fever of the Duke of Lennox, the Marquis of Hamilton, and the younger Ladies Hatton and North, reporting as well that the Dean of St.

\*Professor Kate Frost, Ph.D., Department of English, The University of Texas, Austin, Texas 78712, U.S.A.

<sup>1</sup> My article, 'Donne's *Devotions*: a case history of epidemic typhus', *J. Hist. Med.*, 1976, 21: 421–430, discusses the diagnosis of Donne's illness.

<sup>2</sup> Entered in the Stationers' Register 9 January 1624, by the bookseller Thomas Jones and printed by Augustine Mathewes of Cow Lane, probably in late January. All quotations are from this edition.

<sup>3</sup> R. Crawford, 'Contributions from the history of medicine to the problem of the transmission of typhus', *Proc. Roy. Soc. Med.*, Sect. History of Medicine, 1913, 6: 10.

<sup>4</sup> John Graunt, *Natural and political observations made upon the Bills of Mortality* (1662), ed. Walter F. Willcox, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins Press, 1939; Thomas Short, *A general chronological history of the air, weather, seasons, meteors, &c.*, London, 1749, vol. 1, pp. 306–307. These authors give detailed accounts of the nature and scope of the epidemic of 1623/24.

### Prescription and devotion

Paul's was "in great daunger".<sup>5</sup> Parliament was postponed from 4 September to 15 February and, then meeting, was again adjourned because of the epidemic. The Law Courts nearly ceased their business and, again in the words of Chamberlain: "[The spotted fever] is spread far and wide, and takes hold of whole households . . . God keep it from among us, for we are in danger."<sup>6</sup>

A reading of Donne's *Devotions* verifies the danger of the illness and demonstrates moreover that the poet's recovery was not mere accident. Both of his physicians, Simeon Foxe and Theodore Turquet de Mayerne, were members of the Royal College of Physicians. Foxe, a life-long friend and Donne's personal physician,<sup>7</sup> seems to have been the first summoned (Devotion IV is titled *The Phisician is sent for*), and then seems to have called into consultation other unidentified physicians (Devotion VII: *The Phisician desires to have others joyned with him*). Devotion VIII, however, records that James I, learning of the perilous condition of his favourite Royal Chaplain, sent to Donne's bedside his personal physician, Theodore Turquet de Mayerne (who had then been treating the king for a severe bout of arthritis). Mayerne had a monumental reputation in England, and justifiably so. A Swiss-born French Protestant who had been banned in 1603 by the Faculty of the University of Paris from practising medicine there because of his Paracelsian leanings, he became physician in turn to James I, Charles I, and Charles II, gathering as patients along the way Robert Cecil, Prince Henry Stuart (whom he unfortunately lost to enteric fever), and one Oliver Cromwell. Among the first to advocate bedside study of disease and the written case history, he is credited with introducing the use of calamine lotion, *lotio nigra*, and an early form of laudanum, and even with concocting the coronation oil still used by the British crown. Finally, he was the moving power behind the first *London Pharmacopoeia* of 1618.<sup>8</sup> Examination of his voluminous writings reveals a mind steeped in the Galenic lore of his day, yet one admirably open to innovation, especially to the radical chemical nostrums of Paracelsus — but his was also a mind rarely given to advance theory over practical observation and experience.

Mayerne left some twenty-three volumes of notes and an *Opera medica*,<sup>9</sup> the latter published nearly fifty years after his death, an event testifying to the eminence of his reputation in British medicine. Of especial interest in this publication are his recommendations for the treatment of that notable hypochondriac, James I, in all possible emergent occasions. Among these is a Latin treatise *Ad febram purpuream* on the spotted or "purple" fever, as typhus was then called in England. Composed less than six months after Donne had returned to his public duties, the treatise may have drawn on his case history. Certainly it gives a reliable corroboration of Donne's

<sup>5</sup> *The letters of John Chamberlain*, ed. N. E. McClure, Philadelphia, The American Philosophical Society, 1939, vol. 2, p. 531.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 576.

<sup>7</sup> *Dictionary of national biography*, reprinted 1959–60, vol. 7, p. 597.

<sup>8</sup> For additional information, see *ibid.*, vol. 13, pp. 150–152; Benjamin Lee Gordon, *Medieval and Renaissance medicine*, New York, Philosophical Library, 1959, pp. 663–664; Royal College of Physicians, *Pharmacopoeia Londinensis*, 1618 (facsimile edition, Madison, Wisc., State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1944), pp. 20–21; Sir Norman Moore, *The history of the study of medicine in the British Isles*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1908, pp. 65–66; Leslie G. Matthews, *History of pharmacy in Britain*, Edinburgh, E. & S. Livingston, 1962, p. 173.

<sup>9</sup> Theodore Turquet de Mayerne, *Opera medica*, ed. J. Brown, London, 1701.

own account of his illness. Moreover, it not only demonstrates an acquaintance with typhus and its treatment, evidencing Mayerne's familiarity with Fracastorius and contemporary theories of miasmatic infection, but also throws new light on certain features of the illness which Donne had incorporated into the structure of his *Devotions*: the poet's pathological fear, his sleeplessness, and the application of the carcasses of doves to the soles of his feet.

In terms of contemporary practice, Mayerne's treatment of Donne as evidenced both in *Ad febram purpuream* and in the *Devotions* makes a good deal of sense. But, since to translate his rather convoluted seventeenth-century Latin is not necessarily to make his advice understandable, I have appended to various segments of this translation an explanation of the ingredients and the use of the more significant of his nostrums and techniques, especially those to which Donne bears witness in his *Devotions*.

*AD FEBREM PURPUREAM*<sup>10</sup>

Grassatur hoc Anno 1624: praeter consuetam Coeli in Septentrionali isto tractu constitutionem flagrante periculosissima ista Febris, non tam contagiosa quam ob universalis Causae Dispositionem communis, multas in eadem domo corripiens, & plerosque jugulans, Malignitatis plenissima quae ab insigni Exustorum Humororum Putredine orta ebullientis in majoribus Venis Sanguinis feralem Fermentationem Comitem habet, percillitur Cor, languent Spiritus, & Vis σφγγμηη intercidit debilissime saliente Pulsu.

[In this year 1624, one which was extremely warm, unlike the usual disposition of the skies in these northern regions, there has spread an exceedingly dangerous fever, not so much contagious as ubiquitous, owing to a universal disposing cause, striking many in the same dwelling and killing several. It is most full of a malignity that, arising from an exceptional putrefaction of the dry humours which boil up in the major veins, is accompanied by a fatal fermentation in the blood. It smites the heart, the spirits languish, and the force of the blood vacillates with an extremely irregular pulse.]

Mayerne describes a malign, as distinguished from a true, contagious fever, resulting from the action of a general or "universal" cause upon a natural disposition of the bodily humours to fever. In this he follows Fracastorius who, in 1545, classified the pestilent fevers and provided the first medical description of typhus.<sup>11</sup> English medical literature of the day proposed four "disposing" causes of pestilent fevers: the generally pestilential air, stagnant waters, hot weather, and, according to Sir Thomas Elyot, "Moch people in smal roume living unclenly and sluttishly".<sup>12</sup> Pestilential vapours were supposedly inhaled and conveyed from the lungs to the vena cava where they attacked first the venous spirits, then the humours, and finally the "firme substance of the whole body".<sup>13</sup>

When the "firme substance" of the body was thus attacked, a morbid state ensued, so that one of the bodily humours (in Donne's case, melancholy) was produced in excess. The resultant raised temperature, as the body's defences came into action,

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., pp. 305–306. I have modernized punctuation.

<sup>11</sup> Hieronymus Fracastorius, *De contagione et contagiosis morbis et eorum curatione*, trans. Wilmer Cave Wright, New York, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1930, pp. 76–116.

<sup>12</sup> Sir Thomas Elyot, *The castel of helthe*, 1541 (facsimile edition, New York, Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1937), p. 14a.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Cogan, *The haven of health*, 1584, 4th ed., London, 1636, p. 309. Cogan enjoys the dubious distinction of having been an eyewitness at the Oxford Assizes where typhus, transmitted from a prisoner, killed two judges, the sheriff and undersheriff, and all but two of the jury—although the prisoner survived.

### Prescription and devotion

“cooked” and separated the humour, with the “raw” or uncooked portion evacuated through sweating, urination and defaecation, or other emissions, such as bleeding from the haemorrhoids. The physician aided this process by keeping his patient warm and hastening evacuation of the uncooked humour by bleeding, purging, and admission of diaphoretics and sudorifics. The timing and proportion of treatment was deemed to be the key to the patient’s survival. Thus Donne’s doctors attempted first to mitigate the “boiling” of the humours within the veins, lest it engender a “melancholy adust”, or burnt choler, defined by Timothy Bright in *A treatise on melancholie* as the venom which “riseth by excessive heate of such partes, where it is engendred or received, whereby the humour is so adust, as it becommeth of such an exulcerating, and fretting qualitie, that it wasteth those partes, where it lighteth.”<sup>14</sup> Next the physicians fortified the heart against the adust humours (Devotion XI: *They use Cordials, to keep the venim and Malignitie of the disease from the Heart*). Finally, they attempted to draw the poisonous vapours away from the brain and thus prevent delirium (Devotion XII: *They apply Pidgeons, to draw the vapors from the Head*).

Unicum hic est ut primis Diebus Eventilatione interni incendii sistatur Ebullitio, & Cordi per Plebotomiam, si omnia consentiant procuretur Refrigerium. Id vero in E. M. non sine Cautela, parcius si pro more fluant Haemorrhoides, uberius si salutaris Fluxus multis ante Diebus substerit.

[Here it is unique that for the first days, because of the outward ventilation of inward heat, the boiling is stopped, even in the heart, by phlebotomy, if all the medicines combine to produce an effect of cooling. Nevertheless, this procedure should not be applied to the case of His Majesty without caution: less if his haemorrhoids flow as they do customarily, but more if after a few days a more salutary flow of blood might obtain.]

The purpose of phlebotomy or venesection was to reduce excessive humours, in Donne’s case melancholy adust (Meditation XII: “But what have I done, either to *breed*, to *breath* these vapors? They tell me it is my *Melancholy*; Did I infuse, did I drinke in *Melancholly* into my self?”).<sup>15</sup> The doctors could attribute the obsessive fear which pervades Devotions VI and VII (*The Phisician is afraid; The Phisician desires to have others joyned with him*) to the effects of melancholy adust which “destroyeth the braine with all his faculties, and disposition of action, and maketh both it, & the hart cheere more uncomfortably: and if it rise of the naturall melancholy, beyond all likelihood of truth, frame monstrous terrors of fear and heavinesse without cause.”<sup>16</sup> Bloodletting in such a case was risky business at best, and Fracastorius cautioned its use only in the early days of the fever when “the outward ventilation of inward heat” signified that the disease had not penetrated the organs deeply. Nevertheless, the procedure often resulted in heart failure, a major cause of death in these cases.

The opening of the haemorrhoids was consistent with Renaissance medical practice. According to contemporary thought, the melancholy excrement of the liver passes down from the spleen “with grosse and melancholie juyce” into the haemorrhoids

<sup>14</sup> Timothy Bright, *A treatise on melancholy*, London, 1586, p. 32. Elyot, op. cit., note 12 above, p. 72b, identifies three kinds of melancholy adust: “eyther it is of naturall melancoly aduste, or of choler adust, or of salt fleume adust. But of all other that melancoly is warst, whiche is ingendred of choler.”

<sup>15</sup> Sigs. Olv–02r.

<sup>16</sup> Bright, op. cit., note 14 above, p. 33.

where, unless released by bleeding, it “delivereth of pleurisies, phrensies, and madnesse”.<sup>17</sup> Engorged haemorrhoids were opened either by venesection or by the application of raw onions and garlic. Fracastorius had urged such a blood-letting: “When the contagion is very widely dispersed in the body, avoid venesection, but employ cuppings, provided there is no abnormal plethora. For when that is the case it will be removed more effectively by means of drugs, or by opening the haemorrhoidal veins, or by incision of the saphenous vein.”<sup>18</sup>

Deinceps dentur Antidota. Lap. Bezoar. Radix Contrayerva, Pulvis rubeus Pannonicus, Bolus. Bezahardicus, Dioscordium Fracastorei.

[Antidotes should be given in the following order: bezoar stone, contrayerva root, Hungarian red powder, a bolus of bezahar, the diascordium of Fracastorius.]

The bezoar, a mineral stone of mythical efficacy retrieved from the intestines of animals, supposedly counteracted venom, prevented fainting attacks, and mitigated heart weakness and fever. The remaining drugs are diaphoretics, probably intended as substitutes for, or supplements to, bloodletting. Contrayerva root (*Dorstenia brasiliensis*) was first imported from the New World by Drake in 1581; Hungarian red powder consisted of vegetable matter, ground precious stones, and gold; the bezahardic bole (a large pill) consisted of febrifuge herbs, the hearts and livers of serpents, unicorn horns, and “the mineral bezoar”, that is, butter of antimony prepared with spirit of nitre.<sup>19</sup> It was both diaphoretic and, too often, extremely toxic. Finally, the diascordium of Fracastorius was an electuary paste taken either internally or smeared on the abdomen as part of the deep-massage therapy considered beneficial to the liver (Meditation XI: “Therefore doth the *Physician* intermit the present care of *Braine*, or *Liuer*, because there is a possibilitie, that they may subsist, though there bee not a present and a particular care had of them”).<sup>20</sup> Its principal ingredient was the scordium or water-germander, then famed as an astringent and febrifuge. Other ingredients dictated by Fracastorius included cinnamon, cassia wood, tormentilla, galbanum, gentian, opium, mineral earth, honey, and aromatic wine.

Dioscordium magistrale meum, Antidotus Saxonica viperina, Electuarium de Ovo, Diaphoretic. Antimon. Aqua Theriacalis, Aqua de Cordibus mea, repetenda Cardiaca, pro eorum effectu, & aegri dispositione ad oblata.

[My own magistral diascordium, the Saxon poison antidote, an electuary of egg, diaphoretic antimony, theriac water, and my own water for the heart; repeating these remedies according to their results and in the order of their good effect on the patient.]

The magistral, a formula devised by a physician for particular circumstances, was not drawn from the recognized pharmacopoeias. Several are included in Mayerne’s published works and in his prescriptions for the British royal family.<sup>21</sup> Both the Saxon antidote and the electuary of egg (the latter a glutinous, sweet paste) contained counter-venoms, heart stimulants, and febrifuges including wolfsbane, juniper berries, canker worms, myrrh, and stagshorn.

Mayerne had been banned from the practice of medicine by the Paris College of

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Fracastorius, *op. cit.*, note 11 above, pp. 228–229.

<sup>19</sup> Probably a crude mixture of antimony and saltpeter. The “mineral bezoar” was a chemical approximation of the natural stone.

<sup>20</sup> Sig. M6v.

<sup>21</sup> Mayerne, *op. cit.*, note 9 above, pp. 19–47.

### *Prescription and devotion*

Physicians in 1603 most specifically for the use of diaphoretic antimony. Although generally employed only by followers of Paracelsus, it had early been cited by Hippocrates as a sudorific and cordial, and was used principally to induce sweats in syphilis and epidemic fevers. Theriac, an ancient and popular shotgun remedy (probably the original snake-oil) contained as many as forty ingredients, depending on the patient's pocketbook. The 1618 *Pharmacopoeia Londinensis* recipe calls for green walnuts, marigolds, rue, thistles, balm, angelica, masterwort, scordium, canary wine, vinegar, and lemon juice, among other things, digested with horse dung and distilled in sand.<sup>22</sup> Mayerne himself left two magistral recipes for cardiac water, each a mixture of citrus, fruits, and herbs steeped in Rhine wine and Spanish claret.<sup>23</sup>

Provocandus Somnus Syrupo de Papavere, frontali.  
[For inducing sleep, syrup of poppy on the forehead.]

Devotion XV (*I sleepe not day nor night*) attests to the terrible sleeplessness, common in typhus, which plagued the feverish Donne. Unfortunately, the opium extracts of the day, said to have been introduced by Paracelsus, often caused nausea, headache, and delirium. As an alternative, a syrup of poppy-capsules, sugar, and water was rubbed on the temples:

Refrigerandum, & corrigenda Petredo, Ptyzana vulgari, Emulsionibus, Julepis, Jusculis alteratis acidis Oxalide, Oxytriphyllo, succo Citri, Limonum, Spiritu Vitrioli, Sulphuris, Salis.

In iis etiam utiliter dissolventur Crystalli Oxalidis & Oxytriphylly.

Lapidi Brunellae ad complendam istam intentionem nihil est secundum.

[For cooling and correcting the putrefaction, common barley broth, in emulsions and juleps, blending in the same the acids of either the common or the three-petalled sorrel, with lime and lemon juice, and spirits of vitriol, sulphur, and salt.

In these potions, further, it is advantageous to dissolve the salts of the common and three-petalled sorrel.

For completing this mixture nothing is second to saltpeter.]

Emulsions and juleps differed primarily in consistency, both being oily or mucilaginous potions for soothing inflamed mucous membranes (Donne mentions his constricted throat in Meditation XII). Juleps relied more, perhaps, on a citrus base and were rather sweeter and more acidulous than emulsions. Barley broth, cider, white wine (held by Galen to be the most cooling of all wines), citrus juices, and rosewater all acted as vehicles for the less palatable contents of the medicine: the acids and spirits of sorrel (a common fever remedy found in most medicinal gardens), obtained by crude methods of distillation and evaporation; spirits of vitriol (sulphuric acid), of sulphur (weak sulphurous acid, a Paracelsian specific for fever), and of salt (hydrochloric acid).

Clyster refrigerans & leniens sit admodum frequens.

[A cooling and soothing clyster should be administered frequently.]

The 1618 *Pharmacopoeia Londinensis* clyster, or enema, recipe called for beets, mallows, and violets, all cooling simples, mixed with mercury.<sup>24</sup> Administered with

<sup>22</sup> *Pharmacopoeia Londinensis*, op. cit., note 8 above, p. 105.

<sup>23</sup> Mayerne, op. cit., note 9 above, pp. 47, 419.

<sup>24</sup> *Pharmacopoeia Londinensis*, op. cit., note 8 above, p. 17. Elyot's description, op. cit., note 12 above, p. 56a, tallies: "Clysters are made of lycour, sometyme symple, as water sodden, mylk, oyle, or wyne. somtyme myxt, as water and oyle together, or decoctions, as where herbes, rotes, fruites,

a silver or gold clyster tube, this mixture was aimed at combating both fever and dehydration.

Revellendum a Corde & Cerebro, Cucurbitulis, Vesicatoris, Columbibus dissectis applicitis Plantis Pedum.

[For drawing the venom from the heart and head: cupping, blistering, and the application of split carcasses of doves to the soles of the feet.]

Donne's Devotion XII (*They apply Pidgeons, to draw the vapours from the Head*) supplies the most famous reference to this strange remedy, although it finds frequent mention in the literature of the day, more probably for its picturesque than its healing qualities.<sup>25</sup> The split carcass of a freshly killed animal, often a dog, was thought to have powers of drawing venom from the body, especially from wounds. (The remedy is still in use in some areas of southern North America for snakebite. The animal used is usually a small mammal or a bird, probably due to their high body temperatures.)

Haemorrhoides si subsistant, poterunt aperiri, praesertim si Caput infestetur.

[The haemorrhoids, if they are engorged, may be opened, particularly if the head is affected by fever.]

James I was a notorious sufferer from this complaint; how much Mayerne may have based his prescription for the king on his experience with Donne is uncertain.

Venae sub Lingua aperiendae in Delirio & Brunellana.

[In the event of delirium, the vein under the tongue should be lanced and the mouth washed out with a solution of prunella.]

*Prunella vulgaris*, the common herb heal-all, was a styptic preparation used in phlebotomy.

Cor muniendum. Epithemat. solid. ex Melissa Cortice Citri, Thymo citrato Theriaca. Conf. Alkerm. & Pulveribus cordialibus, addito Aceto.

[For fortifying the heart: a strengthening poultice of lemon-balm, orange-thyme theriac, confection of alkermes, and cordial powder, to which vinegar has been added.]

This poultice, placed on the breast as a heart strengthener, was considered as effective as medicine taken internally. The kermes "berry" (actually the female *Coccus ilicis*, or scarlet grain insect) was a primary ingredient of the confection of alkermes, an Arabian nostrum thought to fortify the heart. Although cordials are more familiar today in palatable liquid form, the seventeenth-century apothecary's shop stocked cordial waters, liquors, powders, pills, pastes, lozenges, and gums.

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sedes, orgumes, hauynge properties to make softe, dissolue, drawe forth, or expelle matter that greueth, be boyled, and the lycour thereof, sometyme warme, sometyme hote, is receyued at the fundement into the body by a lyttell pipe of golde or syluer, yuorie or wodde, therefore ordeyned and callyd a clyster pipe."

<sup>25</sup> John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* was printed in 1623, the year of Donne's illness, but had been performed as early as 1614. The pigeon remedy stems from Act II, Sc. 1, 11.47–50: "I would sooner eat a dead pigeon taken from the soles of the feet of one sick of the plague than kiss one of you fasting." The remedy also finds mention in Thomas Lodge, 'A treatise of the plague' (1603) in *The complete works of Thomas Lodge*, New York, Russell & Russell, 1963, vol. 4, p. 68; in Henry B. Wheatley (ed.), *The diary of Samuel Pepys*, New York, Random House, [n.d.], vol. 1, p. 748; and in C. M. Mitchell, *The Shakespeare circle*, Birmingham, Cornish Bros., 1947, pp. 72, 101, where John Hall, Shakespeare's physician son-in-law, describes the laying of pigeons to his own feet when he was ill with fever in 1632.

### Prescription and devotion

Oleum Scorpionum, Matthioli Pulsibus illitum est efficax Remedium.  
[The scorpion oil of Matthiolus smeared on the pulses is an effective remedy.]

Scorpion oil supposedly prevented delirium and provoked urine. Recipes differed; that of Matthiolus (1500–1577) featured thirty live scorpions caught when the sun was in Leo, combined with an oil of bitter almonds, set in the sun for forty days, and, naturally, strained.<sup>26</sup>

Penitus extincta malignitate, apparentibus signis Coctionis in Urinis, purgandum benedictis, vix ac ne vix quidem ante decimum quartum Diem.  
[When the disease has been eradicated completely, as indicated by concoction in the urine, a benign purge should be administered, but not before the illness has run its course at least fourteen days.]

The urine, allowed to stand and then heated, gave out precipitates, some of which resembled the “cloud” described by Donne in *Expostulation XIX*: “What is my *seale*?” It is but a *cloud*: that which my *Physitians* call a cloud, in *that*, which gives them their *Indication*.<sup>27</sup> This cloud, according to Sir Thomas Elyot, “if it be whyte, lyght, risynge up from the bottome of the urinall, lyke a peare, it sygnifieth helth.”<sup>28</sup> It was presumably a product of the stomach’s natural digestion or “concoction”.<sup>29</sup> The benign purge ordered by Mayerne was perhaps the “*Benedicta laxativa*” offered by the 1618 *Pharmacopoeia Londonensis*.<sup>30</sup> The fourteen-day wait before purging, first prescribed by Fracastorius in his treatise on the spotted fever,<sup>31</sup> reflects the period from onset through lysis of typhus.

Orandus Rex ut Medicis quam primum post ipsum Morbi insultum se committat, alias Occasio calva ut in D. Duce de Lenox nuperrime.  
[The king should be urged to give himself over to the care of the doctors as soon as possible after the onset of the disease; otherwise the chances of recovery are slim, as most recently was the case with the Duke of Lennox.]

Many typhus victims succumbed to heart failure before the appearance of the petechial rash or the approach of lysis. For example, Esme Stuart, the above-mentioned Duke of Lennox, died suddenly of spotted fever on 30 July 1624, only three days after he had been taken ill.<sup>32</sup> Donne, on the other hand, sent for his physician immediately after he took to his bed (*Devotion IV*).

Today typhus still has a power to strike fear equal to that which it had in the

<sup>26</sup> Pietro Andrea Mattioli, *Medici, commentarii secundo aucti in libros sex pedacii Dioscoridis . . . De medica materia*, Venice, 1560.

<sup>27</sup> Sig. Y10v.

<sup>28</sup> Elyot, *op. cit.*, note 12 above, p. 88b.

<sup>29</sup> According to Elyot, *ibid.*, pp. 15b–16a, “The grosse meate ingendreth grosse bloude, but where it is well concocte in the stomake, and well-digested, it maketh the fleshe more fyrm.”

<sup>30</sup> *Pharmacopoeia Londinensis*, *op. cit.*, note 8 above, p. 80. *Devotion XXII: The Physitians consider the root and occasion, the embers, and coales, and fuell of the disease, and seeke to purge or correct that*, indicates that, when they were sure of Donne’s returning strength, the physicians attempted a second purge to eradicate the “ashes” of the “burned choler”, deemed so deadly by Bright and Elyot.

<sup>31</sup> Fracastorius, *op. cit.*, note 11 above, pp. 100–111, 222–237.

<sup>32</sup> George Edward Cockayne, *The complete peerage*, ed. H. A. Doubleday, and Lord Howard de Walden, London, St. Catherine Press, 1929, vol. 7, p. 608.



seventeenth century. Mortality among Europeans from non-epidemic areas alone has been estimated at thirty per cent, and this rises sharply among victims over the age of forty. The disease usually proves fatal to those over sixty.<sup>33</sup> Modern patient care does not differ largely from that prescribed by Dr. Mayerne — although scorpion oil and bezoar stone have given way to chloramphenicol, chlortetracycline, and oxytetracycline. These medications aside, however, patient care often proves the difference between death and survival: “Good nursing, a fluid diet and symptomatic therapy with analgesics and hypnotics is essential. During the second week, difficulty is often experienced in maintaining adequate fluids by mouth and intravenous glucose or glucose-saline is then indicated.”<sup>34</sup> Mayerne’s treatise and his treatment of Donne demonstrate his knowledge of typhus, although his methods were primitive by any standard. He seems to have read his Fracastorius, for he is aware of the fourteen-day period leading to lysis. Moreover, his prescriptions indicate his knowledge of the need for keeping up bodily fluids and his fear of cardiac failure. Finally, he demonstrates his perception of how quickly the disease can debilitate and destroy in his directing his royal patient to seek medical care immediately — as had Donne — rather than allow the fever irrecoverably to weaken the heart or complications to hinder the patient’s chance for cure.

The medical world of Theodore Turquet de Mayerne has, despite many a sharp observation and plain good guess, become merely the matter of history. For the student of literature, however, his treatise on the spotted fever is a practical help for understanding Donne’s *Devotions*. The poet’s sleeplessness, his descriptions of strange medicines and treatments, and his detailed account of the progress of his fever receive strong corroboration in *Ad febram purpuream*. More particularly, the treatise demonstrates the very real ground for fear, on behalf of patient and physician, that the Dean of St. Paul’s, in the words of Meditation XVI, might “be an *incumbent* by lying down in a *grave*, . . . a *Doctor* by teaching *Mortification* by *Example*, by *dying*, though I may have *seniors*, others may be *elder* than I, yet I have proceeded apace in a good *University*, and gone a great way in a little time, by the furtherance of a vehement *fever*.”<sup>35</sup>

#### SUMMARY

During his recuperation from epidemic typhus in 1624, the poet John Donne composed the *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions and Severall Steps in my Sicknes*, which functions both as a spiritual book and as a unique record of the progress and treatment of typhus fever. Donne’s physician, Theodore Turquet de Mayerne, a leading light of the Royal College of Physicians, also left a record of the typhus outbreak and his course of treatment, entitled *Ad febram purpuream*. The two works evidence strong corroboration of Renaissance diagnosis, prescription, and treatment of the disease. Mayerne’s treatise, appearing here in translation, corresponds to Donne’s description of his medicines and nursing care; moreover, it prescribes nostrums and techniques which, while they throw light on both Galenic and Paracelsian seventeenth-century medicine, are remarkably in accord with modern practice.

<sup>33</sup> C. H. Stuart-Harris, ‘The rickettsial diseases’, Chapter 30 in Sir Samuel Bedson, *et al.*, *Virus and rickettsial diseases of man*, 4th ed., London, Edward Arnold, 1967, p. 422.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>35</sup> Sigs. S5v–S6r.