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psychiatry in history

Eating disorder in 17th century France

Greg Wilkinson

'A Strange Miracle in Poitiers'

Harrison relates a case report suggestive of anorexia nervosa that emerged from France and was talked of in England in 1603. Poitiers was known for miracles, and in 1356, the Battle of Poitiers was a key victory for the English in the Hundred Years' War. By the 16th century, Poitiers comprised royal courts, a university, printing shops, a wealth of religious institutions, a cathedral, markets, impressive domestic architecture, extensive fortifications and a castle.

"1603. 29th October. There is a book printing from the French called *A true and admirable history of a maiden of Consolens in the Province of Poitiers*, who for the space of three years and more hath lived (and yet doth) without receiving either meat or drink. This maiden (of the age of about 14 years) hath been seen by the French King himself, and by his command his best and chiefest physicians have tried all means to find whether this fast be by deceit or no. It is said that she was seized by a continued and severe fever on the 16 day of February 1600, since which time the *oesophagus* (or little belly) hath lost the force attractive, and no one can persuade her to eat, nor even to suck or lick meats delicate, fruits and sweet things agreeable to such young years. Her belly, intestines and bowels are all withdrawn or annihilated by want of food, yet in the other parts of her body there is no corresponding diminution. There comes no excrement or urine from her body, which moreover yields no sweat; yet doth she travail about the house, go to the market, spin at the wheel and gives herself to all serviceable offices in a family."

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