

Shakespeare And Medicine

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The present day medicine has some of its roots dipping down to even pre-Hippocratic era. Most contributors were medical men but some non-medical men also have some share in it. This brief account is about Shakespeare's keen medical observations who wrote his wonderful dramas 200 years before the time of microscope and stethoscope. His gems of knowledge are often quoted in general literature and also in some medical works. The management of tuberculosis has seen many vicissitudes. Bed-rest is less emphasized today. Still the moderator of an annual symposium of the American College of Chest Physicians summed it up with a line from Macbeth "to bed to bed, there is knocking at the gate, to bed, to bed, to bed" and Fredrick Sutton in the latest edition of his book on diagnoses quoted from Hamlet, "not to dull the palm with entertainment of each new hatched, infleged comrade" to say that he has added new matter with discretion.

Of the various causes of headache dilatation of extra-cranial arteries was known to him for the loving Desdemona assures her warrior husband Othello who complained of headache, "Let me bind it hard, it will be well in an hour". Drugs then also were of limited value in psychiatry as shown by the following dialogue in Macbeth.

Macbeth- "How is your patient doctor?"

Doctor - "She is troubled by thick coming fancies which keep her from rest."

Macbeth- "Cure her of that. Can'st thou not minister to a mind diseased, remove from memory a rooted sorrow with some sweet antidote?"

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Doctor - "There that patient must minister to himself."

Macbeth- "Throw thy phsic to the dogs. I will none of it".

Somnambulism is vividly depicted in Lady Macbeth's sleep-walking monologue. "There is smell of blood still... Not all the perfumes of Arabia will sweeten this little land." Infanticide: She admits "I would, while it was still smiling in my face, have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums and dashed the brains out. "Hallucination: Macbeth says, "is this a dagger which I see before me, the handle toward my hand ? Come let me clutch thee. "Insomnia: King Henry IV bewails at midnight, "O sleep, nature's soft nurse: How have I frightened thee. O partial sleep, give thy repose to the wet sea-boy in an hour so rude and with all appliances and means to boot, deny to a king ? Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown." Caesarian delivery: Macduff tells Macbeth, "Despair thy charm. Macduff was from his mother's womb untimely ripped." Rehabilitation: "It is not enough to help the feeble up but to support him after." Vide Timon of Athens. Value of analgesics, "He that sleeps knows no toothache." Hysteria: "Sorrow if not given vent in tears may make other organs weep", hysteria most: Epileptic fit: "He fell down and foamed at mouth" Depression and suicidal tendency, "I begin to be weary of the sun" Evils of drinking, "O God, that men should put an enemy in their mouth to steal a way their brains": Oral Hygiene: Bid them keep their teeth clean". On smile: Caesar says "Casca seldom smiles. Such men are dangerous". Dying declaration: Prince Hamlet names his successor, "He (Fortinbras) has my dying voice". Malingering of Prince Hamlet even Premier Polonium could only observe "Though this is madness there is method in it". "Diseases desperate grown are by desperate appliances relieved or not at all" are pointers to once not too infrequent use of cathartics and blood letting. "Thy womb let loose..." suggests birth control (Richard III). More there are in his works which rank among the best tragedies, comedies and poems, both ancient and modern. About his works his contemporaries Ben Johnson, Emerson, Akbar remark "not of an age but for all time." "master of the revels of mankind", "I hear of Shakespeare who writes pretry line and does plays on the side" respectively.

Still 200 years had to elapse before the full significance of the Shakespearean treasure began to be increasingly appreciated and studied in the wide world by observers of foreign lands and languages. His works have already seen hundreds of editions in English and translations in even greater number of other languages. It is hard to imagine a university or a faculty

of higher studies where some of his works are not in its curriculum. He is indeed the most read writer. Timely reference to his gems of knowledge and typical characters enhances a person's including medical men's art of expression. Here are a few, "Frailty thy name is woman, The devil can cite scriptures, what is in a name ? The pound of flesh, To be or not to be is the question, Look thou character, Et tu Brute ? Mercy seasons justice, To thine own self be true," Helen, Cleopatra, Portia, Cordelia, Imogen, Macbeth, Caesar, Lear, Antony and many many others. Human life is dotted with pleasure and pathos. Its transitoriness is well revealed in Macbeth's late realization, "Out out, brief candle, Life is but a walking shadow...And is heard no more" and Hamlet's last words before death, "The rest is silence".

Yet the world's greatest dramatist of stratford-on-Avon anticipates that the future writers will further unravel the mysteries that still surround the life of man when he suggested seriously to his friend Horatio-

"There are some more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy"

and indeed this process is in progress. I accept this brief account has much affected the beauty and force of the original contexts.

