This paper analyses the perception and interpretation of sweat and insensible transpiration in early modern learned medicine and medical lay culture. Based on Galenic physiology, sweat was thought to excrete superfluous serum, harmful impurities and sometimes also fat, chyle or blood. Since sweat was closely associated with pollution and stench, its timely elimination seemed crucial, and physicians and lay-people alike ranked the suppression of sweating among the major causes of disease. Sudorifics and sweat baths were widely used in prophylaxis and therapy. Excessive sweat carried the risk of losing too much vital matter, however. The copious sweat of consumptives, in particular, was taken as evidence that their bodily substance was melting away. Constantly confirmed by the seemingly naturally given, self-evident but inevitably culturally-framed experience of the body in health and disease, and thus deeply rooted in the contemporary bodily habitus, many of these notions and images remained alive in spite of new anatomical findings and profound changes in medical theory.

Sweating ranks among the most basic, elementary bodily experiences. Yet sweat is also heavily fraught with culturally-embedded images and notions. For many people in western societies, sweaty armpits are a major cause of embarrassment and can, at times, even seriously affect social interaction. Antiperspirants and deodorants have developed into a multi-billion dollar market. Saunas and steam baths are hailed as a powerful means to ‘detoxify’ the body. Far more than one would expect from a seemingly innocuous, bland, watery fluid, sweat is associated with shame and embarrassment, with pollution and stench, but also with purification, sexual attraction and masculinity.

Surprisingly, historians of medicine and the body have so far paid hardly any attention at all to sweat.1 The following survey of early modern

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meanings of sweating and transpiration and the theories and practices surrounding them is thus a first attempt to chart still largely unexplored territory. My analysis will draw, above all, on learned writing. I will supplement this material, however, as much as possible with evidence from patient letters, autobiographies and ethnographic accounts which give a better grasp of the meanings of sweat in the medical culture and daily lives of ordinary people. Inevitably, covering a period stretching over three centuries with hardly any groundwork by other scholars to build upon requires a certain degree of bold generalisation. Thus I will not be able to analyse in any depth the subtle differences in the ways individual authors understood sweat and, although I will mention new anatomical and histological findings and new medical theories such as iatrochemistry, Stahlism and vitalism, I will not make a systematic attempt to trace their impact on different authors or their respective views on sweating. This approach seems justified not only by the lack of extant research but also by the fact that the medical understanding and the lay experience of sweating emerge as remarkably stable throughout the period under consideration. And, it is hoped, this overview can entice other scholars to look in greater detail at individual authors, theories, periods or issues in this field.

The learned tradition

Sweat played a considerable, but not particularly prominent, place in early modern medical writing. It was the topic of several dozens of medical dissertations. Medical textbooks usually mentioned sweating, at least briefly. Collections of medical observations, a very popular genre at the time, contain stories of patients with more or less extraordinary types of sweat.

Early modern medical writing on sweat was based above all on Galen. Galen, and early modern physicians with him, described sweating as an excretion of thin, ‘serous’ humours. Somewhat surprisingly from a modern perspective, sweat was closely related to urine.² Because, according to Galen, both sweat and urine ultimately originated from the same matter, both contained a certain amount of bile³ and both were, in their natural

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