How to Get a Melancholy Marquess to Sleep? Melancholy in Scholastic Medicine

Timo Joutsivuo

Introduction

Marquess of Ferrara Obizzo II d'Este (about 1247–1293) was a well known nobleman and a leader of the Florentine political party, the Black Guelfs. He was also mentioned by Dante Alighieri in his Divine Comedy. Dante placed Obizzo in Hell among the tyrants, who “indulged in bloodshed and rapine.”¹ In the late thirteenth century Obizzo II d'Este turned for help to the famous Florence-born Bolognese professor of medicine, Taddeo Alderotti (1205/1215–1295). The reason was that the Marquess was suffering from severe melancholy with one special symptom, insomnia, which was the reason why he had not been able to sleep properly in two years.²

Taddeo Alderotti did what was asked of him and wrote a special regimen for the Marquess, which was later used as a general guide for taking care of melancholic patients. This was because the regimen was included in Taddeo's collection of case studies called Consilia. This collection included a total of 185 case studies, and it became very popular as a medical handbook.

This chapter will investigate Taddeo Alderotti's recommendation to Obizzo d'Este and the reasoning behind his choice of cure. This inevitably involves a brief overview of what was understood by melancholy in medicine at the turn of the fourteenth century. Therefore, Alderotti's more theoretical writings will be examined alongside more practical case studies, which do not contain any systematic study of the causes and signs of a particular disease. Taddeo Alderotti's theoretically oriented texts include his commentaries on university medical textbooks, Hippocratic Aphorisms, Galen's Tegni and Isagoge, which was written by the Nestorian Christian physician and scholar Hunayn ibn Ishaq (809–873), known as Joannititus in the West. Galen's Tegni was a very

---


important textbook on the theory of medicine in medieval universities and *Isagoge* was an Arabic short introduction into Galenic medicine.

To get a deeper understanding of the matter the ideas of two other contemporary physicians are also investigated: Pietro Torrigiano (d. a. 1319), who was one of Alderotti’s students and the writer of a *magnum opus* of scholastic medicine, a much-praised commentary on Galen’s *Tegni*,\(^3\) and Bernard de Gordon (d. 1320), who taught medicine at the University of Montpellier. Bernard wrote more practically oriented treatises on medicine, and his most famous book, *Lilium medicine*, was intended as an aid in medical practice for his younger colleagues. With Bernard de Gordon it is possible to compare the contemporary ideas of melancholy in the two most important medical centres at the turn of the fourteenth century. Moreover, both Taddeo Alderotti and Bernard de Gordon were very influential during their lifetimes and all three had a powerful influence on fourteenth-century university medicine.

It is, however, worth remembering that university educated physicians were only a small minority of all professionals or part-time healers working on medicine at the turn of the fourteenth century. In most parts of Europe, especially in rural areas where the majority of the people lived, there were probably only a few physicians, if any. Beside university educated physicians, who were called “rational and learned doctors” by Roger French,\(^4\) a number of different kinds of practitioners offered their services: surgeons, barber-surgeons, barbers, apothecaries, empirics often specializing in treating one special surgical condition, and professional midwives. Moreover, family members, neighbours and friends could serve as casual healers. Priests and mendicants also helped the sick, although the church had banned them from practicing some forms of medical care. In the fourth lateral council in 1215 surgical operations, for example, were forbidden from the clergy.\(^5\) Thus, the ideas about melancholy presented in this chapter reflect the scholastic approach and do not necessarily tell the whole story regarding the medieval concept of melancholy.

In this chapter, I propose to discuss specific aspects of theory related to melancholy: firstly, melancholy as an illness, secondly melancholy as a normal disposition of man, thirdly the ageing process and its relationship to melancholy, and finally the methods used to treat melancholy, before proceeding to

\(^3\) It was known as *Plusquam commentum in artem parvam Galeni*.
