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A HUMANIST DESCRIBES AND PRESCRIBES:  
THOMAS WILSON AND MEDICINE

ALBERT J. SCHMIDT

The intellectual vitality of the Elizabethan Renaissance cannot be dissociated from the quantitative interest in medicine and the cure of ills, but one must wonder indeed about the compatibility of humanism and true medical progress. Historians of science, who have long argued that humanism looked backward rather than forward, condemn its slavish adherence to ancient authority. Such opinions seem entirely justified when the ideas of the noted Elizabethan humanist, Dr. Thomas Wilson, are examined.

There can be no doubt that Thomas Wilson (1523?-1581),<sup>1</sup>—Cambridge humanist and religious reformer, expert in the Roman Civil law, member of parliament, ambassador and expert in Netherlandish and Portuguese affairs, privy councilor and principal secretary, and even rackmaster—was one of the most versatile of late Tudor personages. His vast official correspondence abounds with comments on topics beyond the routine aspects of his position. What he occasionally had to say about disease and its likely cure is relevant for the medical historian because his ideas probably reflect the thinking of his fellow humanists as well: in other words, his was the voice of sixteenth century intellectual authority, and we may presume that it or ones similar to it were heeded.

Wilson's first comments on disease appear in his famous *Arte of Rhetorique* (1553) in which he comments on the visitation of the sweating sickness to Cambridge where he was a student and fellow during the late 1540's and early 1550's. It was the same "sweat" which John Caius, in *A Booke, or Counseill Against the Disease Commonly Called the Sweate, or Sweatyng Sicknesse*, observed:

. . . immediately killed some in opening their windowes, some in plaieng with children in their strete doores, some in one hour, many in two it destroyed, and at the longest, to them that merilye dined, it gave a sorrowful Supper. As it founde them so it toke them, some in sleape some in wake, some in mirthe some in care, some fasting and some ful . . . if the haulfe in everye Towne escaped, it was thoughte great favour.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See my "Thomas Wilson, Tudor scholar-statesman." *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 1957, 20: 205-218.

<sup>2</sup> Archibald Malloch, ed.: *A Booke or Counseill against the Disease called the Sweate*

Wilson himself was directly affected by the epidemic as it swept away his two young pupils, Charles and Henry Brandon, successively dukes of Suffolk. Lamenting the untimeliness of their passing, Wilson recorded their last hours as he scrupulously noted portents of the impending disaster:

They were both together in one house, lodged in several chambers and almost at one time both sickened and both departed. They died both Dukes, both well learned, both wise, both right Godly. They both gave strange tokens of death to come. The elder, sitting at supper and very merry, said suddenly to the right honest matron and godly gentlewoman, (Mrs. Margaret Blakborn) that most faithful and long assured servant, whose life God grant long to continue: "O Lord, where shall we sup to-morrow at night?" Whereupon, she being troubled, and yet saying comfortably, "I trust, my Lord, either here, or elsewhere at some of your friends' houses." "Nay," quoth he, "we shall never sup together again in this world, be you well assured," and with that, seeing the gentlewoman discomfited, turned it into mirth and passed the rest of the supper with much joy and the same night after twelve of the clock, being the fourteenth of July, sickened, and so was taken the next morning, about seven of the clock to the mercy of God, in the year of our Lord, 1551. When the eldest was gone, the younger would not tarry. But told before (having no knowledge thereof by any body living) of his brother's death, [and to] the great wondering of all that were there, [he declared] what it was to lose so dear a friend. But comforting himself in that passion said, "Well, my brother is gone, but it maketh no matter for I will go straight after him," and so he did in the space of half an hour.<sup>3</sup>

To Wilson the moralist the death of the two boys signified censure from God. Determining the reasons for God's wrath was therefore of far greater importance than countering the malady. Wilson's thinking on the matter presents a striking example of the humanist's view of medicine:

When God therefore that is Lord not only of the rich but also of the poor, seeth His ground spoiled from the wholesome profit of many to the vaine pleasure of a few and the earth made private to suffice the lust of unsatiabie oppression, the sore enhancing and the most wicked grazing of those throughout the whole Realm, which otherwise might well live with the only value and some of their lands and yearly revenues; He striketh in his anger the innocents and tender younglings to plague us with the lack of them whose innocency and Godliness of life might have been a just example for us to amend our most evil doing. . . . For it is not one house that shall feel the fall of these two princes, neither had God taken

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(1552), John Caius. New York: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1937, fol. 9. See also Elizabeth M. Nugent, ed.: *The Thought and Culture of the English Renaissance*. Cambridge: University Press, 1956, pp. 300-301.

<sup>3</sup>G. H. Mair, ed.: *Thomas Wilson's Arte of Rhetorique 1560*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1909, p. 68.

thim for one private person's offences; but for the wickedness of the whole Realm which is like to feel the smart except God be merciful unto us.<sup>4</sup>

Some years after the Cambridge experience Wilson, married to an ailing wife and plagued with the prospect of caring for motherless children, wrote a lengthy Latin letter to his gout-ridden friend and colleague in statecraft Sir William Cecil, later Lord Burghley. Unhesitatingly Wilson offered likely remedies, [based upon his observations of his wife's distress,] for Cecil's illness.<sup>5</sup>

Its occurrence in his wife moved him to seek some kind of relief. "And so, hoping in the Gods, I set myself to reading Galen; and he says in that book of his, *Concerning the method of curing by cutting of the vein*, that he had restored to full health by an incision in the vein many gouty persons and also persons subject to other illnesses." Wilson continued that he fetched a surgeon "and learned doctor as well," so that the two could together diagnose his wife's trouble and offer a conclusion "in the light of Galen's judgment and opinion."

Finally we agreed (although Galen urged that the blood be let in early spring) that after her body had been prepared, the vein in my wife's right foot should be pierced and two days later the blood be let from the other foot. Each time her feet were placed in tepid water and thirty ounces of blood were let.

In his letter the humanist gleefully continued that since her treatment his wife was improved in general health: "She feels that her feet are strengthening and that the natural heat is being restored, whereas heretofore her limbs had been affected with swelling and her feet frigid with cold." The letter concluded with a brief philosophy of medicine coupled with a tinge of that civic humanism so strong in Wilson:

How I wish you might find Galen as helpful to you in your illness as my wife now appears, after two pounds of blood were extracted solely to her benefit. But God is superior to Galen or to Aesculapius: he then may make your health his care. Still, in the meanwhile, the knowledge of the doctors should not be set aside nor the skill of healing neglected. As for myself and especially for the sake of the country I do not want you to be afflicted with sickness nor in the slightest way impeded by your feet's performing their office less ably than they should since you are so prompt in spirit and so exquisitely diligent in looking out for the affairs of the kingdom.

Some years later (after he had buried wife Agnes) Wilson proffered advice to Cecil (by then Lord Burghley) once again. Burghley's trouble-

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 69-70.

<sup>5</sup> Wilson to William Cecil, Nov. 13, 1569, in Henry Ellis: *Original Letters of Eminent Literary Men*. London: Camden Society Publications, no. XXIII, 1843, pp. 28-31.

some gout persisted. The ever-resourceful Wilson, on embassy in Brussels, found time to recommend a change in the Lord Treasurer's wine diet. He found that a great good could be gained by drinking Rhenish wine "which not only comforts my stomach but keeps my body open and consumes the rheum so well as I do not spit almost at all." In contrast, when he (Wilson) was in England and drank only "Gascon" wine, "my body was filled with excessible and needless humours." Cecil was urged to look to the example of Sir Thomas Gresham for if the latter "had drunk half so much Gascon wine as he had Rhenish wine he could not be half so healthy as he presently is."<sup>6</sup> It is perhaps surprising that Wilson's own final inventory showed Gascon wine in his cellar but no Rhenish.<sup>7</sup>

Wilson, playing no favorites, offered advice to Burghley's rival Walsingham as well. While in the Low Countries in 1577 he wrote the Queen's secretary that he had met an Italian doctor, Michael, who was most adept in curing "divers carnosities." One person afflicted with such fleshy growths for some forty years had been successfully treated by him. Wilson begged permission to bring his man back to England, if Walsingham were disposed to receive him. The tone of the letter implies that Walsingham had need for treatment, too.<sup>8</sup>

In a letter to Burghley during the autumn of 1578 Wilson relayed important diplomatic information: the Spanish governor of the Netherlands and half-brother of Philip II of Spain, Don John of Austria, was dead. Wilson seems to have been less concerned with the international significance of the event than with the cause of death. According to his report Don John "suffered great torments and pains in his body, being infected not only with the plague but with disease called Les Broques and the French sickness withal."<sup>9</sup> The prince's body had been "opened and his bowels buried . . . all the principal parts of his body were found inwardly waisted and consumed."<sup>10</sup>

Wilson's comments about his own health are of particular interest. On one occasion he had taken to his couch because "ill health stirs my

<sup>6</sup> Wilson to Burghley, Apr. 18, Cal. of State Papers Foreign, 1575-77, no. 1393.

<sup>7</sup> See my "A Household Inventory, 1581." American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia. *Proceedings*, vol. CI, 1957, p. 475.

<sup>8</sup> Wilson to Walsingham, Apr. 18, 1577, Cal. of State Papers Foreign, 1575-77, no. 1395.

<sup>9</sup> I have been unable to define "Les Broques." "French sickness" is obviously a reference to syphilis.

<sup>10</sup> Wilson to Burghley, Oct. 18, 1578, Kervyn de Lettenhove, ed.: *Relations politiques des Pays-Bas et de l'Angleterre sous le règne de Philippe II*. Brussels, 1882-1900, vol. XI, no. 4229.

bile," while on another he was plagued with hemorrhoids.<sup>11</sup> In the spring of 1580 he wrote to his good friend, the earl of Leicester, that he had left his official duties for two weeks because he had "great heat in my reins." His physician, Dr. Hector, promised him speedy recovery, for "I do drink morning and evening a full pint of Tower Hill water which doth me great good and hath taken away the thirst wherewith heretofore I have been troubled."<sup>12</sup> Kidney disturbances were not uncommon complaints for such wine loving gentlemen, and Wilson, hardly temperate, was ultimately a victim.

Wilson's earnestness in seeking the cure of illness is less likely to be remembered than his humanist treatises or his political service to his queen; but his comments illumine that rich jungle in which both quackery and medicine flourished during the sixteenth century.

<sup>11</sup> Wilson to Burghley, Jan. 2, 1576/77, Cal. of State Papers Foreign, 1575-77, no. 1159.

<sup>12</sup> Wilson to Burghley, British Museum Harleian MSS., 6992-60, fol. 120.