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Dante Alighieri's Mentions of the Skin: Assessing the Great Poet's Dermatological Knowledge

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ABSTRACT

Dante's Dermatological Knowledge

This article examines the nature of the dermatological references occurring in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, in their pathological and symbolic meanings, contextualizing them in the theoretical framework of the Middle Ages, biblical use of the terms, and previous classical knowledge. The focus is particularly laid on descriptions of leprosy and scabies.

Key Words: Dante Alighieri - Dermatology - History of Medicine - Pathology - Skin

Introduction: Dante between poetry and medicine

Last year Italy, the country whose unification and political existence he first dreamt of, and an entire world of admirers, celebrated the 700th anniversary of Dante Alighieri's death (Ravenna, North-East Italy, AD 1321). In the vast literary and philosophical *corpus* he left hu-

mankind, he is still universally remembered as the author of the *Divina Commedia* (Divine Comedy), although the original title may have simply been *Commedia* or *Comedia* (Comedy); the adjective ‘divine’ was consistently used from the edition produced by the humanist Lodovico Dolce (1508/1510-1568) and printed in Venice in 1555¹.

Like all masterpieces of world literature, Dante’s *Comedy* also lends itself to many interpretations, not least, the medical one, which highlights Dante’s competence both in the theoretical and philosophical-scientific aspects, and in the practical ones, relating to the materiality of the body, health and disease.

The interest in the medical aspects of the *Comedy* has a long tradition. Dante was a member of the *Arte dei Medici e degli Speziali* (‘Guild of Doctors and Apothecaries’)². It is said that he attended the classes given by Taddeo Alderotti (1215-1295), a Florentine scholar who had risen to fame at the University of Bologna. His scientific works and manner of teaching even became the matter of mediaeval novels abounding in biomedical references such as the *Novellino*³.

Dante loved Beatrice Portinari (1265-1290), whose father, Folco di Ricovero (died 1289), founded in 1288 the hospital of Santa Maria Nuova in Florence and whose governess, Monna Tessa (1250-1327), was the first *Oblata* (i.e. a person consecrated to the care of the sick)⁴. The hospital of Santa Maria Nuova in Florence was the first hospital, founded in the West with a sanitary approach, which has never changed its mission up to today⁵.

Beyond these facts, which highlight particular formative circumstances and certain biographical aspects of the work, the *Comedy* offers much more compelling evidence of Dante’s intimate relationship with the world of medicine, and indeed many passages refer to dermatological conditions, in particular, in the VIII Circle of the Bolgia X: all the Malebolge (ditches) are reserved for the same category of sinners, those who have committed fraud and the VIII Circle hosts the counterfeiters.

Dante’s references to dermatology: an analysis of their interpretations

Some tercets are dedicated to the plague of Aegina, as it is narrated by Ovid⁶. According to the ancient myth, Juno, furious because Jupiter has fallen in love with the nymph Aegina, sent a plague to her island. In Dante’s words the resulting devastation could only be overcome by the poverty of the infernal landscape.

*I do not think it were a sadder sight
to see the whole race in Aegina sick,
when so suffused with poison was the air;*

*that all the animals, down to the little worm,
fell dead, and when the ancient race of people,
according to what poets hold for truth,*

*out of the seed of ants restored themselves;
than now it was, to see the spirits languish
down in that gloomy ditch in different heaps.
(Inf. XXIX, 58-66)⁷.*

The Aegina plague can be understood as erudite classical literary knowledge, but the message can also be seen as a sense of the perpetuation of the desperation of the inhabitants of Aegina, renewed in the destiny of the damned, that are unable to heal. Dante does not provide any details on the 'plague' of Aegina, perhaps because he did not live long enough to witness the plague which ravaged Europe in 1348, but also because the term *pestis* / λοιμός (loimòs) described many infectious diseases that were characterised by their uncontrollable spread, and from their inevitable fatal outcome⁸. The mythical setting is preserved and renewed by Dante, who reintroduces the representation of the epidemic as divine punishment.

A little later Dante proposes that the punishment of counterfeiters is to be affected by diseases which can be superficially defined as dermatological. According to the general interpretation of the sense of *contrapasso* (retaliation), the disease alters and corrupts the appearance of counterfeiters, just as they altered the nature of what they falsified⁹. The mythical, unjust, and collective punishment of the plague, unknown at the time of Dante, is therefore overcome by an individual's divine punishment, which was probably interpreted as leprosy; two reasons can be considered for this¹⁰. Firstly, from the 11th to the 13th centuries, leprosy was the disease *par excellence*. In addition, a rich body of literary and artistic references to it has been described in the biomedical literature¹¹. Secondly, Dante calls the alchemist Capocchio, sentenced to death in 1293, a 'leper'.

*Whereat the other leprous one, who heard me,
replied to what I said
(Inf. XXIX, 124-125)¹²*

Leprosy is a chronic disease, usually caused by *Mycobacterium leprae*: this acid-fast bacillus that has a tropism for peripheral nerves, skin, and mucous membranes of the respiratory superior tract, was discovered by Gerhard Armauer Hansen in Norway in 1873¹³. A new species, *M. lepromatosis* causing diffuse lepromatous leprosy, has been identified in 2008¹⁴. Symptoms are diverse and include polymorphic skin lesions with anaesthesia and peripheral neuropathy¹⁵.

According to Dante's definition, the souls of the damned are contextualised in a landscape, which evokes a situation of desperate pain: the laments and the stench of this bedlam exceed those of all the sick, if they were gathered together, in the Southern part of Tuscany and Sardinia in the season of malaria.

*Such pain as there would be,
if from the hospitals of Val di Chiana,
Maremma and Sardinia, from July
until September, all diseases came
together in one ditch; such was it here
(Inf. XXIX, 46-51)¹⁶*

A further element of their infirmity is weakness, aggravated by an incessant itch; the damned, scratching themselves, remove ‘the scabies’, the peeling of the skin with their nails. Therefore, there is no unanimity regarding the identification of the disease. Some have believed that the infirmity that afflicts the souls is scabies and that the word ‘leper’ is only a generic definition for ‘sick’, ‘leprosy’ being the pathology identified among the first in mediaeval pathocenosis¹⁷. Also supporting this hypothesis is that diffuse lepromatous leprosy is the variety that has always affected the collective imagination with its macules, papules, hard nodules (lepromas) which merge leading to severe deformities, ulcerations, and mutilating lesions, but no itching.

Scabies, on the other hand, is a water-related skin infestation by *Sarcoptes scabiei*, and causes intensely itchy lesions with erythematous papules and burrows in the interdigital spaces, wrists, waist and genitals¹⁸. The burrows, pathognomonic of the disease, appear in the form of wavy, thin and slightly scaly lines¹⁹.

In his *Purgatory*, Dante uses the word ‘scabies’ in a generic and symbolic sense. The dermatological diseases and the itching are a metaphor for greed; a moralising *topos* in the literature of the ancient world²⁰.

*‘Ah, prithee, heed thou not the dried up scab,
he pleaded, ‘which discolours thus my skin,
nor any lack of flesh that I may have!’
(Purg. XXIII, 49-51)²¹*

Scabies appears, in a more vulgar expression, also in *Paradise*, when Cacciaguida invites Dante to report his journey faithfully, even if many may not like his words:

*yet, none the less,
all falsehood having been removed from it,
cause thy whole vision to be manifest,
and where the itch is let the scratching be!
(Par. XVII, 127-129)²²*

In this tercet, Dante uses the term ‘mange’, in a proverb that belongs to a low linguistic register. The term ‘mange’ was the vulgar expression with which scabies could be identified, a disease that appears, in the Bible, among the ‘Curses for disobedience’:

*The Lord will afflict you with the boils of Egypt, tumours, a festering rash,
and scabies, from which you cannot be cured (Deut. 28,27)²³*

with which pathology counterfeiters are punished is therefore a complex question. Some commentators have assumed that Dante may have alluded to both infirmities, with both leprosy and scabies almost united as a hendiadys, which goes beyond diagnostic authenticity²⁴.

If mange/scabies has a metaphorical reason for being in Paradise, it is the only dermatological disease, which, while causing itching and skin erythema, does not involve the internal organs. On the contrary, leprosy is a disease that can have very disabling consequences and could be more directly associated with hellish punishment²⁵. In this perspective, also aggravated by a further symbolism, leprosy would represent the corruption of the limbs, which arises from putrefied humours; hence, the reference to the stench to which Dante alludes²⁶.

In the Comedy, the reference to leprosy also occurs in another case:

*but as upon Soracte Constantine
once bade Sylvester heal his leprosy;
(Inf. XXVII, 94-97)²⁷*

The term *lepra* was first used in the modern sense by non-medical Hellenistic writers, such as Manetho, Lysimachus, Josephus, as well as in the Greek translation of the Bible²⁸. In Greek the medical terms *lépra* and *leprós* imply 'scaly' and 'knotty'. For Hippocrates, the term indicated a benign pathology. It is not fatal, it occurs in spring, is caused by a humoral imbalance (black bile deposit) and is treated with light medicines such as salt dissolved in vinegar²⁹. The Hellenistic and Roman authors underline the appearance of livid, ulcerative, deep prominences, rot of the parts, and fall of the fingers³⁰. If true leprosy, which was also described by the classical authors, was called elephantiasis and, in the initial stages, satyriasis and leontiasis, the term *lepra* then prevailed, because it was used in the biblical texts³¹.

In truth, the translation of the Hebrew term *tzaraath* with *λέπρα*/leprosy is somewhat problematic and dates back to the Greek translation of the Septuagint³². For this reason, some biblical scholars believe it is preferable to transliterate the word indicating the skin manifestations described as *tzaraath* rather than translating them. There are no equivalent terms and any attempt at translation diminishes the distinctive character of the Hebrew word, which, in the Old Testament, assumes the archaic consideration of an individual divine punishment³³. This is the case of Miriam (*Num.* 12, 15) and of Naaman in the II *Book of Kings* (5, 1-27), and, perhaps, Job, whose disease has been identified as leprosy in iconographic sources³⁴.

The so-called 'leper' in the Bible is the prototype of the religious and social marginalisation imposed by law. The lepers had to live and stay outside the villages, wear torn clothes, and warn when they saw someone from afar³⁵:

Anyone with such a defiling disease must wear torn clothes, let their hair be unkempt, cover the lower part of their face and cry out, 'Unclean! Unclean!' As long as they have the

*disease they remain unclean. They must live alone; they must live outside the camp. (Lv. 13,45-46)*³⁶

In the New Testament, however, the treatment of the ‘leper’ becomes an expression of the efficacy of the divine miracle³⁷.

Therefore, there were biblical precedents, however problematic, in support of the relationship with the biblical source. There is an immediate reference to the parable of Lazarus, ‘leper’, and of the rich man, in comparison with the invocation of Master Adam in the Comedy. If the rich man asks for mercy - *So he called to him, ‘Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire’ (Lk. 16, 24)*³⁸ -, Master Adam craves a drop of water, recalling the streams that flow from the Casentino mountains.

*When living, I had all that I desired,
and now, alas, I crave a drop of water.
The little brooks which toward the Arno run*

*down from the Casentino’s green-clad hills,
and render all their channels cool and fresh,
are evermore before me, nor in vain;
(Inf. XXVII, 62-67)*³⁹

On the one hand, therefore, there is a tradition which tends to trace leprosy back to biblical sources, as a model of a divine punishment that left a visible stigma, but not supported by certain elements⁴⁰.

On the other hand, there is scientific evidence, obtained thanks to palaeopathological research, which confirms that in the European Middle Ages there were many strains of leprosy, more numerous than previously thought⁴¹.

Conclusion

The devastation of the body was, therefore, considered the sign of divine punishment, the stigma of sin. In the mediaeval city, the leper was excluded from the community and confined to special dwellings where they could only wait for death⁴². The sick person, in the Middle Ages, is a revealed sinner, forced to show, with the disfigured body, the aberrations of the soul. However, at the same time, apart from being a natural condition of man after the original Sin, the disease becomes *via salvationis*; a mean to conquer the salvation of the soul and an opportunity for redemption.

Dante favours the approach to disease as an individual punishment, as a sign of sin, and uses it as a cornerstone for the Songs of the forgers, which bear the mark of retaliation on their own skin⁴³. Although today skin disorders are not considered divine punishment, the psychological and social effects of not looking perfect, still stigmatise the patient.

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