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Experiencing Disease and Medical Treatment in Renaissance Italy: Cardinal Pietro Bembo and his Circle

Abstract: This article, which examines contemporaries' personal experience of illness in Renaissance Italy, is part of a growing literature which concentrates on the patient rather than the practitioner. The basis of this study is the correspondence of Pietro Bembo, the well-known humanist, papal secretary and latterly Cardinal, with his cousin Gian Matteo Bembo and his long-standing secretary and friend, Cola Bruno. These letters are revealing of how a non-medical man understood and described illness in the sixteenth century, and his personal experience associated particularly with "mal delle reni", which he shared with his friends and recommended treatments. It also reveals his attitude towards medical practitioners, ranging from scepticism to fully embracing new therapies such as Holy Wood, which was used to treat the new epidemic disease of the Great Pox. Indeed he shared his enthusiasm for the efficacy of this drug with his great friend the physician Girolamo Fracastoro, the author of *Syphilis*, the poem which he dedicated to Bembo, and also of the treatise *De contagione et contagiosis morbis* (1546).

Keywords: Pietro Bembo, Girolamo Fracastoro, Gian Matteo Bembo, Cola Bruno, the Great Pox, "mal delle reni"

Attendete a star sano. L'acqua del legno ha guarito in pochi di una doglia e gravezza, nella persona della qualità della vostra, a M. Cola. Questo dico a fine che, se la vostra doglia e gravezza continuasse, ne deste aviso, chè vi manderei del Legno, e il modo di pigliar l'acqua. Fate che io intenda alcuna cosa dettavi di me a Zara dalla vostra Santa.¹

This letter dated 13th June 1538 was written by the famous humanist Pietro Bembo to his cousin, Captain Gian (Giovanni) Matteo Bembo.² The Cap-

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¹ Pietro Bembo. *Lettere*, vol. 4 (1537-1546), ed. Ernesto Travi, (Bologna: Commissione per i testi di lingua, 1993), 118, no. 1936.

² The most recent biography of Pietro Bembo (Venice, 1470 – Rome, 1547) is: M. Faini, *Pietro Bembo. A Life in Laurels and Scarlet*, (Cambridge: Modern Human Research Asso-

tain had recently been sent by the Republic of Venice to take charge of Kotor, known to the Venetians as Cattaro and part of their possessions in the eastern Adriatic, during their on-going war against the Ottoman Empire.³ The two main features of Bembo's letter of 13th June which are particularly relevant to our theme, neither of which have been subject to analysis, are the description of the pains from which Gian Matteo Bembo suffered and the treatment with Guaiacum or Holy Wood, which, as we shall see, was the cure-all drug recommended by many doctors for incurable diseases in the first half of the sixteenth century. It is also significant that Bembo compares Gian Matteo's symptoms with those of the third actor in this drama, his secretary Cola (Niccolò) Bruno, a cleric from Messina. Cola was his inseparable friend, secretary, librarian and faithful literary collaborator for almost half a century, and with whom he shared information about sickness and treatment.⁴

This article will take Bembo's correspondence with his two friends as its point of departure to examine contemporaries' personal experience of sickness in Italy in the first half of the sixteenth century, a theme which has recently begun to attract more attention from scholars.⁵ What makes this topic of particular interest is the position of Bembo as one of the leading humanists at the time, who frequented noble courts, such as the Este in Ferrara, became the official historian of Venice, and whose intellectual achievements were recognised by the papacy from Leo X to Paul III, who elevated him to the cardinalate. Also significant for our theme is Pietro Bembo's close friendship and correspondence with the well-known physician Girolamo Fracastoro, who was regarded at the time as one of the main medical experts on contagious diseases. Fracastoro was especially renowned for his writings on the Great Pox or the French Disease, the new epidemic which had rapidly spread with such devastating effects across

ciation, 2017). On Gian Matteo Bembo (Venice, c. 1491 –?, c.1570), see P. Fortini Brown, "Becoming a man of empire: the construction of patrician identity in a republic of equals". In *Architecture, Art and Identity in Venice and Its Territories, 1450–1750: Essays in Honour of Deborah Howard*, eds. Nebahat Avicioğlu, Emma Jones, (London: Routledge, 2013), 231–249; Ead, "Pietro Bembo e l'arte della diplomazia". In *Pietro Bembo e le arti*, eds. Guido Beltramini, Howard Burns, Davide Gasparotto, (Venice: Marsilio, 2013), 37–47.

³ K. M. Setton, *The Papacy and the Levant (1204–1571)*, vol. IV: *The sixteenth century from Julius III to Pius V*, (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1984).

⁴ On Cola Bruno (Messina, 1480 – Padua, 1542), see V. Cian, *Un medaglione del Rinascimento: Cola Bruno Messinese e le sue relazioni con Pietro Bembo (1480 c.–1542). Con appendice di documenti inediti*, (Florence: G. C. Sansoni, 1901); Cola Bruno's testament, from the Archivio di Stato di Padova is published in: F. Piovan, "Il testamento di Cola Bruno", *StEFI Studi di erudizione e di filologia italiana I* (2012), 188–189; cf. also M. Faini, *Pietro Bembo*, 27.

⁵ See M. Stolberg, *Experiencing Illness and the Sick Body in Early Modern Europe* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); S. Cavallo, T. Storey, *Healthy Living in Late Renaissance Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Europe from the mid-1490s.⁶ Significantly, Fracastoro's poem *Syphilis sive morbus gallicus*, was dedicated to Bembo. The poem had been conceived between 1510 and 1512, and Fracastoro wrote it in the period when Bembo was employed by Leo X as papal secretary, 1513–1521. Bembo had in fact been closely involved in editing the first draft of the book. It appeared, much to Fracastoro's disgust, in an unauthorized version full of errors in 1525 in Venice, but the final version was published five years later both in Venice and in Verona, where he lived.⁷ Bembo, moreover, had much appreciated the compliment paid to him when Fracastoro dedicated the poem to him, sharing as he did a deep knowledge and love of the classics.⁸ It is also significant that Gian Matteo Bembo was also on friendly terms with Fracastoro, as evidenced by the letters of support that the physician sent to Pietro Bembo at a time when Gian Matteo's career was in crisis.⁹

The correspondence most relevant to our theme spans the years 1538 to 1541. The discussion will follow a broadly chronological trajectory, and relate to two main geographical locations, Kotor, where Gian Matteo was based, and then Rome, to where Bembo himself moved from Padua in 1539. Our aim is not to attempt a form of retrospective diagnosis,¹⁰ but rather to discuss how contemporaries understood disease as a collection of symptoms within a Galenic paradigm. These letters, then, reveal Bembo's attitude towards disease, his

⁶ For studies of this disease in Italy see: J. Arrizabalaga, J. Henderson, R. French, *The Great Pox. The French Disease in Renaissance Europe* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997); E. Tognotti, *L'altra faccia di Venere. La sifilide dalla prima età moderna all'avvento di AIDS (XV-XX secolo)*, (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2006).

⁷ G. Eatough, *Fracastoro's Syphilis*, (Liverpool: Francis Cairns, 1984), Introduction; *Scritti inediti di Girolamo Fracastoro*, ed. Francesco Pellegrini (Verona: Valdonega, 1954), 8, 14; S. Pearce, "Fracastoro on Syphilis: Science and Poetry in Theory and Practice". In *Science and Literature in Italian Culture: From Dante to Calvino*, eds. Pierpaolo Antonello, Simon A. Gilson (Oxford: Legenda, 2004), 115–135.

⁸ *Fracastoro's Syphilis*, ed. and trans., Eatough, 4. Pietro Bembo in his *History of Venice* mentioned Fracastoro's skill in alleviating the suffering from "crudel morbo, che mal Francese si chiama", see P. Bembo, *Della historia Vinitiana: volgarmente scritta libri XII*, (Venice: Ziletti 1570), 37–38.

⁹ On 12 September 1544 Fracastoro declared that it was shameful Gian Matteo had not been made a Cavaliere for his truly extraordinary achievements in Kotor; see *Lettere di principi*, 142–149; P. Fortini Brown, "Pietro Bembo e l'arte della diplomazia", 45–46.

¹⁰ J. Arrizabalaga, J. Henderson, R. French, *The Great Pox*, ch. I; J. Arrizabalaga, "Problematising Retrospective Diagnosis in the History of Disease", *Asclepio: Archivo Iberoamericano de Historia de la Medicina y Antropología Médica* (2002), 51–70; A. Karenberg, "Retrospective Diagnosis: Use and Abuse in Medical Historiography", *Prague Medical Reports* 110 (2009), 140–45; J. Andrews, "History of Medicine: Health, Medicine and Disease in the Eighteenth Century", *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 34, 4 (2011), 503–515.

recommendations of a number of treatments which he regarded as efficacious, and along the way reflected his attitude towards the medical profession.

Kotor

Our story begins in the late 1530s in the strategically important town of Kotor, at the time when *La Serenissima* joined the Holy League to confront a threat posed by the Ottoman Kapudan Pasha Hayreddin Barbarossa against the whole Mediterranean (in February 1538). In the summer of 1538, Gian Matteo has been sent by Venice as *Rettore e Provveditore di Cattaro*, based on his excellent reputation as a captain in Zadar. Pietro Bembo wrote to Gian Matteo to congratulate him on his appointment soon after his arrival to Kotor: "I am very pleased, not only that you have come to Kotor, but also that you liked it more than you expected".¹¹

In 1539 the city was threatened by the Ottoman navy, after Barbarossa had conquered Castelnuovo (Herceg Novi) where he massacred between 3,000 and 4,000 Spanish soldiers who had defended the fortress.¹² It is from the correspondence between Pietro Bembo and his cousin that we learn details not only about his waiting for the Ottoman attack, but also Gian Matteo Bembo's personal battle against his ailments of "doglia e gravezza". Bembo also discussed Cola's health, for, as he mentioned to Gian Matteo, Cola had evidently become ill some years before. In 1536, Pietro Bembo had written a letter to Gian Matteo, when he was still captain in Zadar, expressing concern about Gian Matteo's "gravi infermità". In the same letter Pietro mentioned that Cola had "un poco di mal di fianco, anzi molto mal di fianco".¹³ However, as we have seen from the letter cited at the beginning of the article, the disease had obviously progressed over these two years for, like Bembo's cousin, he suffered from "doglia e gravezza".¹⁴

¹¹ *Molto mi piace non solo che siate giunto sano e salvo a Cataro, ma che il luogo vi sia piaciuto più che non pensavate*, see Pietro Bembo. *Lettere*, vol. 4, 121, no. 1940. Cf. also P. Fortini Brown, "Pietro Bembo e l'arte della diplomazia", 42.

¹² K. M. Setton, *The Papacy and the Levant (1204–1571)*. IV, 430–433, 446–448, et passim; M. Á. de Bunes Ibarra, "Carlos V, Venecia y la sublime puerta: la embajada de Diego Hurtado de Mendoza en Venecia". In *Carlos V y la quiebra del humanismo político en Europa (1530–1558)*, eds. José Martínez Millán, Ignacio Ezquerro Revilla, (Madrid: Sociedad Estatal para la Conmemoración de los Centenarios de Felipe II y Carlos V, 2001), 594–595; N. Samardžić, *Karlo V*, (Belgrade: Centar za modernu politiku, 2005), 251–267, 437–440. M. Pellegrini, *Guerra Santa contro i Turchi. La crociata impossibile di Carlo V*, (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2015).

¹³ *Pietro Bembo. Lettere*, vol. 3 (1529–1536), ed. Ernesto Travi, (Bologna: Commissione per i testi di lingua, 1992), 651, no. 1760. (10. May 1536).

¹⁴ *Pietro Bembo. Lettere*, vol. 4, 118, no. 1936. *Santa monaca* was Franceschina da Zara, a profetessa upon whose advice and miraculous protection cardinal Pietro Bembo depended, see

As so often during the course of illnesses, there were periods when patients improved and others when they got worse. Such was the case with Cola in September 1538 when Bembo wrote from Venice on the 10th about “mal vostro delle reni”, suggesting that he took Holy Wood (“Ho inteso d'altrui che sono guariti del mal vostro delle reni con l'acqua del legno.”)¹⁵

By the 24th, Bembo was in Padua, one of Europe's largest centres of medical teaching. Writing to a physician Maestro Carlo Gualteruzzi, presumably to ask his advice about treatment, he mentions both Cola's and his own ailments: “Il mio M. Cola, tornato di Villa nuova, s'è malato, e ha una febre che non è già con cattivi accidenti, ma non lascia che ogni dì non gli venga”; “ho ora un altro in-crescimento, che è segno quanto queste cose mondane sono deboli e inferme”.¹⁶

Gian Matteo was also feeling unwell in this period, as he wrote on 6th August 1539 to Clarissimo Signor Generale Capello:

“come io aspettava l'armata, et l'essercito di Barbarossa sotto questa città [...] Nè temo d'altro, che di ammalarmi per le gran fatiche di due mesi: che, per dire il vero, io non dormo, et se pure alle volte io prendo sonno, ciò faccio vestito et con sinistro. Il giorno poi sempre mi convien trovarmi per tutto: ma il peggio è il bisognarmi ascendere molto spesso questo monte, et andar nel Castello, cosa, che mi affanna, et indebolisce molto”.¹⁷

So far, then, what evidence we have about the state of health of Gian Matteo Bembo and Cola in the 1530s? One of the main symptoms mentioned by contemporaries who suffered from the Great Pox was pain (*doglia*) and a more general condition of *gravezza* or heaviness of the body. Cola suffered as well from “mal di fianco”, and fever on one occasion. Gian Matteo instead had more generic conditions, as in the case of his “grave infermità” when he was *Conte*

V. Živković, “Osanna da Cattaro and Franceschina da Zara: Living Saints as Spiritual Protectors during the Ottoman Siege of Kotor”, *Initial. A Review of Medieval Studies* 6 (2018), 123–136.

¹⁵ *Pietro Bembo. Lettere*, vol. 4, 130, no. 1954. We have chosen to keep the original phrase “mal delle reni” rather than try to translate it into modern terms since, as the anonymous reader noted ‘the diagnosis of a kidney disease is not certain in the light of modern medicine’, and indeed this may be very well be a general term which includes a number of conditions. We are grateful for the reader's comments.

¹⁶ *Pietro Bembo. Lettere*, vol. 4, 133, no. 1957.

¹⁷ *Lettere di principi le quali o si scrivono da principi, o a principi, o ragionan di principi, all'illustriss. et reveren. card. Carlo Borromeo*, libro primo (Venice: G. Ziletti, 1562), 136–137. Vincenzo Capello (1469–1541) was the Venetian admiral who served the Christian Holy League as the *Provveditore dell'Armata*, see E. Pujeau, “La Préveza (1538) entre idéologie et histoire”, *Studi Veneziani*, n.s. 21 (2006), 155–204.

of Zadar in 1536,¹⁸ and in 1539 he suffered from what sounds like exhaustion as he prepared for the defence against the potential Ottoman siege, as he regularly toiled up the very steep hill around Kotor in the summer heat.

Treatment

One of the most significant features of the Bembo correspondence in this period is the insistence on the curative properties of *Acqua del legno*, Holy Wood or guaiacum, also known as *legno nefritico*, *lignum indicum*, *lignum vitae*, and described as «un dono quasi divino».¹⁹ It was especially recommended for treating pain, and, as Fracastoro wrote, particularly efficacious for that caused by the new epidemic of the French Disease or the Great Pox. First mentioned in 1516, it was a hard and resinous wood imported from the West Indies (Hispaniola), and lauded by the indigenous population as a “saving god”, as underlined by Fracastoro in his poem *Syphilis*:

The land (Hispaniola) is fertile in gold, but made far richer by one tree – they call this in the sounds of their native speech Guaiacum [...] the wood is almost like hard iron [...] That foreign race adores this tree and is very eager in its efforts to rear it Nor is anything more sacred to them or of more important use; for all hope lies in it against this plague which the heavens have there made eternal.²⁰

In a letter written by Bembo to Fracastoro from Padua on 26th November 1525, he thanks him for the way that he had described the Holy Wood: “In questo libro la favola del legno non potria esser meglio pensata, nè starci più propriamente di quello che ella vi sta, nè in più atto luogo posta”.²¹

Then on 5th January of the following year, he returned to the subject of the Legno Santo, which he himself had used successfully and recommended to others for the cure of intractable ailments: “Dove quella del legno mi soddisfa ed empie l’animo meravigliosamente. Senza che, per essere il legno cosa nuova,

¹⁸ From August 1534 until November 1537, see P. Fortini Brown, “Pietro Bembo e l’arte della diplomazia”, 41–42.

¹⁹ F. Pellegrini, *Trattato inedito in prosa di Gerolamo Fracastoro sulla sifilide* (Verona: La Tipografica veronese, 1939), 203. On Legno Santo (guaiacum), see R. S. Munger, “Guaiacum, the holy wood from the New World”, *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 4.2 (1949), 196–229; J. Henderson, “Fracastoro, Mal Francese e la cura con il Legno Santo”. In *Girolamo Fracastoro. Fra medicina, filosofia e scienze della natura*, eds. Alessandro Pastore, Enrico Peruzzi (Florence: Leo S Olschki, 2006), 73–89.

²⁰ *Fracastoro’s Syphilis*, 87–89.

²¹ *Pietro Bembo. Lettere*, vol. 2 (1508–1528), ed. E. Travi (Bologna: Commissione per i testi di lingua, 1989), 316, no. 621 (26th Nov. 1525).

ella vi sta più propriamente che non fa quella dello argento, che è cosa trita e ad ognuno famigliare, come sapete".²²

The administration of Legno Santo was part of a forty-day course of treatment, which was intended to lead to the evacuation of the putrefaction of the humours and morbid matter, which was seen as the essence of the disease. This was to be achieved through sweating and purging, combined with a light diet. Thus pills of aloe and hellebore were first to be taken, along with a series of strong simple medicines, such as Canna and China root or sarsaparilla.²³ There were three different products produced from Guaiacum, each of which had a different but related purpose. The wood was first cut up into small pieces almost like sawdust and then soaked in water in a ratio of eight parts of water to one part wood. The water was then boiled until reduced to half its original volume. The foam produced during the boiling was then to be dried and used as a drying powder on sores; a concentrated solution was drunk regularly; and a weaker solution, which was obtained by re-boiling the wood, was drunk during meals.²⁴

The fame of Guaiacum in this period was initially put down to its role as an almost miraculous cure for the Great Pox leads us next to consider briefly the nature of the disease in order to assess whether it is possible that Bembo or his two correspondents may have suffered from it.

The Great Pox was one of the most severe epidemics to affect renaissance Europe. Though its origins have been debated, it is generally accepted that it began in the mid-1490s in the Mediterranean and then spread rapidly from Spain and Italy and then north of the Alps. Its nomenclature varied according to the nation of the chronicler from the French term *Mal de Naples* to the much more common description *Mal Francese* or *Morbus Gallicum*. While the French blamed southern Italians for giving them the disease when their army was in Naples, the Italians and many other Europeans blamed the French for spreading the epidemic through the peninsula and across the Alps.²⁵ According to the early sixteenth-century Spanish doctor Joan Almenar, diseases and other

²² Pietro Bembo. *Lettere*, vol. 2, 327, no. 634: 5th Jan. 1526. Pietro Bembo wrote more letters to Fracastoro in praise of his poem, *Ibid.*, vol. 3, 189, no. 1158: 8th Oct. 1530; vol. 4, 209–210, no. 2058: 13th April 1539; vol. 4, 569–570, no. 2538: 20th May 1546.

²³ J. Henderson, "Fracastoro, *Mal Francese* e la cura con il Legno Santo", 80.

²⁴ R. S. Munger, "Guaiacum, the holy wood from the New World", 206–209; J. Arrizabalaga, J. Henderson, R. French, *The Great Pox*, 100–102, 188–189. The complex nature of the Legno was described by Fracastoro's contemporary, Niccolò Massa, in his *Liber de morbo gallico* (Venice: F. Bindoni e M. Pasini, 1527; Italian translation of 1566).

²⁵ A. Foa, "The New and the Old: the spread of Syphilis (1494–1530)". In *Sex and Gender in Historical Perspective*, eds. Edward Muir, Guido Ruggiero, (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 33; J. Arrizabalaga, J. Henderson, R. French, *The Great Pox*, ch. 2.

calamities befell humans as a punishment for their sins; some diseases were specifically related to mortal sins and he claimed that since the French Disease was akin to leprosy, it was related to lust, which should be avoided so as to preserve themselves and recover their health.²⁶

In addition to spreading rapidly across Europe, the French Disease spread across all levels of society from secular rulers and Church leaders to the professional classes and the poor. Indeed what made it so well-known at such an early stage of the outbreak was that Mal Francese claimed many well-known literate victims, whose illness and treatment was recorded, whether by patrician families, such as the Este dukes in Mantua, members of the papal court or of literary academies, who wrote satirical poems and plays about poxed courtesans or their own experiences with the disease.²⁷

In the case of Bembo and his circle of correspondents, we should not make the a priori assumption that they suffered from Mal Francese, even though they might have had many opportunities to contract the disease. Gian Matteo, for example, as a member of the army would have encountered poxed courtesans, and indeed French soldiers are said to have contracted the Great Pox from prostitutes in Naples and then carried it with them back to northern Europe. Pietro Bembo himself as a young man had numerous love affairs at a time and could therefore have had the opportunity to contract the disease at a time when it was spreading rapidly through Europe. He was based for some time at both the Este court of Mantua and the papal court in Rome, where it was no secret that a number of prominent men had contracted the disease.²⁸

However, even if Bembo recommended Guaiacum, which is best known as a treatment for the Great Pox, it does not mean that he and his friends suffered from it. In contrast, many other contemporaries who had contracted this terrible disease, did not hesitate to mention the other main symptoms, which included pustules, gummata, sores, scabs, and abscesses in the groin. For example, in his poem on the Great Pox published originally in 1510-1511, the Siense poet and actor Lo Strascino, recounted in detail the different types of pain and

²⁶ J. Arrizabalaga, "Medical Responses to the „French Disease” in Europe at the Turn of the Sixteenth Century". In *Sins of the Flesh: Responding to Sexual Disease in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Kevin Siena, (Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2005), 33–55.

²⁷ J. Arrizabalaga, J. Henderson, R. French, *The Great Pox*, chs 3 and 6; D. Zanrè, "French Diseases and Italian Responses: Representations of the Mal Francese in the Literature of Cinquecento Tuscany". In *Sins of the Flesh*, ed. K. Siena, (Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2005), ch. 7.

²⁸ J. Arrizabalaga, J. Henderson, R. French, *The Great Pox*, 44–50, 113, 142–144. See Carlo Dionisotti, "Pietro Bembo", *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, 8 (1966), https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/pietro-bembo_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/

torments he suffered.²⁹ Fracastoro in his book *De contagione* went as far as describing pain as “the most cruel” of all the symptoms of the disease.³⁰ It was the sores and gummata which caused the tremendous pain, since these ate away the flesh and eventually even the bones. However, none of these symptoms were described in the Bembo correspondence, and in one letter that Pietro Bembo wrote to his cousin Gian Matteo on 8th December 1542, he even admits that he did not know the identity of the disease from which he was suffering: “Mi duole del vostro fastidio, ancora che non sappia di che qualità si sia.”³¹

The lack of discussion of any of these obvious symptoms identified by contemporaries as typical of Mal Francese, cannot be taken to suggest that these three men had caught this disease, despite it being widespread in society, any more than Bembo’s enthusiasm for Legno Santo can be taken as proof.

While it is true that all three men suffered from severe pains, they were also typical of many other chronic diseases at the time. Furthermore, while Niccolò Massa and Girolamo Fracastoro included Legno Santo in their treatises on Mal Francese, both underlined that it was also efficacious in the treatment of a wide range of diseases. This again suggests that while it may have been seen as a specific against the Great Pox, a patient to whom it was prescribed may not have had this disease. A similar argument can be made about Theriac, the other miracle drug, best known for its use against plague, but which was seen as a sovereign remedy against a wide range of intractable diseases. In fact, in two letters written in April 1529, Pietro Bembo had mentioned theriac in its successful cure of Gian Matteo Bembo’s sons: “Ho cara la medicina della Tiriaca”; “Et vi ho inteso della Tiriaca”.³²

Guaiacum, like theriac was very expensive to buy, and could only be afforded by the more affluent, who could have bought it directly from a pharmacy.³³ However, one of the largest institutional consumers of the Holy Wood

²⁹ N. Campani, *Lamento di quel tribolato di Strascino Campana senese, sopra el male incognito el qual tratta de la patientia & impatientia* (Venice: Zoppino, 1521).

³⁰ H. Fracastoro, *De contagione et contagiosis morbis et eorum curatione, Libri III*, trans. and ed., W. Cave Wright (New York and London: G.P. Putnams and Sons, 1930), 137–139.

³¹ Pietro Bembo. *Lettere*, vol. 4, 440, no. 2360.

³² Pietro Bembo. *Lettere*, vol. 3, 27–28, no. 949. In a letter written on 12th May 1528, Pietro Bembo greets Gian Matteo with the words: “Attendete a tener (voi) sani co’ vostri, e schifar le medicine quanto il Diavolo.”, see Pietro Bembo. *Lettere*, vol. 2, 518, no. 880.

³³ See the study by James Shaw and Evelyn Welch, *Making and Marketing Medicine in Renaissance Florence*, The Wellcome Series in the History of Medicine: Clio Medica (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), 298–299, where they discuss the stocks of guaiacum kept by a major pharmacy in Florence, the Speziale del Giglio. Cf. also J. Flood and D. Shaw, “The Price of the Pox in 1527: Johannes Sinapius and the Guaiac Cure”, *Bibliothèque d’Humanisme et Renaissance* LIV/3 (1992), 691–707.

were the Incurabili hospitals, which had been founded throughout Italy between the 1490s and 1520s in cities from Venice, Padua, Ferrara, Brescia and Genoa in the north to Bologna, Florence, Rome and Naples to treat free poor incurables. These hospitals became vast consumers of guaiac, as their surviving records attest. At the Incurables hospital of San Giacomo in Rome, guaiac was distributed free to thousands of sufferers, at vast expense to the hospital.³⁴

It is also significant for our theme, that while the Incurabili hospitals may have been best known for the treatment of Mal Francese, and many may have been established originally for this purpose, in fact they came to cater for a wide range of intractable conditions. This role is reflected in Pope Leo X's Bull *Salvatoris Nostris* of 1515 when he re-designated the hospital for the treatment of "the sick poor all infected with various kinds of incurable diseases". This is confirmed by a detailed study of their patient records for the sixteenth century, which has shown that of over 4,500 people admitted in the year 1569–1570, only 20 per cent were diagnosed with a symptom associated with the Great Pox.³⁵

Rome is the geographical centre of our final section, which examines in more detail how Pietro Bembo and his friend Cola described their symptoms in the early 1540s, at a time when both men were suffering from ill health.

Rome

Pietro Bembo had already visited and stayed a number of times in Rome, beginning in 1508, attracted by opportunities to work for the papacy. His first major appointment was with the Medici pope Leo X when he was appointed as Latin secretary and then papal ambassador to Venice. However, he had already begun to suffer from bouts of ill health, including a serious period of four months in 1518, which returned in a more serious form in 1521, so that he had had to leave Rome and go home to Padua. The Rome to which he returned in the late 1530s was a very different place compared with the early 1520s. In the interim the city had suffered from a devastating plague and siege in the 1520s, and the Church had encountered a massive challenge from the Protestant Reformation. The papal court was now dominated by the reformist pope Paul III, who was to establish the main facets of the Counter-Reformation from the Jesuit Order to the Inquisition and the Council of Trent. It was, then, within this context that Bembo found himself, promoted secretly by Pope Paul to the cardinalate in 1538, and officially declared in this role the following year. This entailed Bembo going to live in Rome the following year, leaving his young family in the care of his good friend and secretary Cola.³⁶

³⁴ J. Arrizabalaga, J. Henderson, R. French, *The Great Pox*, ch. 8.

³⁵ J. Arrizabalaga, J. Henderson, R. French, *The Great Pox*, 155, 204.

³⁶ Cf. also M. Faini, *Pietro Bembo*, 27.

While his elevation to the cardinalate represented a new dazzling career at the centre of the Catholic Church, it must also have proved a challenge to the sixty-eight year-old Bembo, whose health had already been declining for some time. The letters written by Bembo to Cola in the early 1540s therefore provide a fascinating patient's eye-view of those ailments he shared with Cola and the various treatments which he found most efficacious. He is solicitous of his friend's health, giving him advice on how to look after himself, not to tire himself out, as he is tormented by a sickness associated with "un mal di reni". While doctors are mentioned along the way, he demonstrates at times a certain scepticism of their practices, aligning himself with many of his contemporaries, who combined self-treatment with consulting a variety of practitioners from officially registered physicians to unlicensed empirics.³⁷

The main problem which both Bembo and his friend Cola suffered from was "chi ha offeso le rene e ha alcuna difficoltà nell'urinare, o altro impedimento in quella parte", as he wrote on 7th March 1540.³⁸ Indeed both of them had had shared health problems for some time, and both suffered particularly badly in this decade. Bembo wrote on 5th July about his "indisposizione delle vostre reni", which had evidently become more serious: "Voi sapete quanto stessi male qui in Roma del male delle reni, e come io fui cento volte vicino alla morte".³⁹ Then on 12th March 1537 Cola Bruno wrote to Pietro Bembo from Padua: "et come che le mie reni rotte et distemperate non mi lascino poter far molta fatica[...]".⁴⁰

As mentioned above, Bembo had been suffering over a long period from problems with "mal delle reni", and had had a particularly bad bout in 1518, which had improved considerably the following year, as he mentioned in a letter of 1st October 1519 to Bernardo Bibbiena, Cardinal of S. Maria in Portico. This letter is particularly interesting, since for the only time in his correspondence Bembo sought to explain the cause of his ailment in humoral terms:

Ora di quella mala qualità delle reni, che così lungamente mi tormentò, pochissima noia sento ... Emmi rimasto un catarro che dalla testa mi scende alle reni, il quale col primo mal mio incominciò ne' mai poscia m'ha lasciato, che per la lunga dimora fatta con meco è molto malagevole a sbarbare.⁴¹

The idea that diseases travelled around the body was a common one since they related to the four humours which were seen as bodily fluids, which when corrupted caused putrefaction and then sickness. Here Bembo is talking about

³⁷ For Cola Bruno's problems with "mal delle reni" see V. Cian, *Un medaglione del Rinascimento*, 66–67; F. Piovan, "Il testamento di Cola Bruno", 176.

³⁸ *Pietro Bembo. Lettere*, vol. 4, 290–291, no. 2164.

³⁹ *Pietro Bembo. Lettere*, vol. 4, 312–315, no. 2199.

⁴⁰ Cola's letter is published in V. Cian, *Un medaglione del Rinascimento* (appendix), 87.

⁴¹ *Pietro Bembo. Lettere*, vol. 2, 134, no. 392. Cf. also M. Faini, *Pietro Bembo*, 93–94.

catarrh, which at the time was seen as deriving from the brain since the brain was seen as particularly moist and cold. When sufficient matter had accumulated in the brain, it then moved to other parts of the body, which were “mal delle reni” in Bembo’s case.⁴²

The accumulation of corrupt humours within the body, whether in the form of catarrh or phlegm, was the reason that much contemporary medicine was concerned with evacuation and purgation. Indeed one of the main themes of Fracastoro’s treatise *De contagione* was the necessity to deal with the phlegm produced by the Great Pox within the body, which was then externalised in the suppurating sores on the outside.⁴³

As with many people in this period, friends and relatives exchanged not only information about their health, but also offered advice on what they had discovered to have been the best methods of treatment, which in Bembo’s case did not include the drastic purgations recommended by the medical profession. Thus when writing on 7th March, Bembo recommended to Cola a certain ‘electuary’: “ho fatto una meravigliosa esperienza e pruova”. He was particularly impressed, because it was “assai dilicato a pigliare”, probably in contrast to many of the more unpleasant cures offered by doctors. In fact, he did not rely on his recommendation alone, for as he wrote to a friend of his called Vincenzo “che si sentiva stare a gran pericolo di non guarir mai, lo ha usato già tre anni, e come incominciò ad usarlo non ha mai più sentito offesa alcuna”. The emphasis here, as with Bembo’s own experience, was to emphasize that just as the electuary was pleasant to take, so it had no side-effects, clearly in comparison to other medical treatments available. He also discusses the method of administering the treatment, for while Vincenzo had taken it every 15 or 20 days, he recommends a more frequent use: “Se io fossi in voi incomincerei subito ad usarlo, nè il lascerai mai più essendo così facile e piacevole medicina”.⁴⁴ Although Bembo never actually disclosed the identity of this electuary,⁴⁵ he did reveal in some detail two more treatments which he recommended for their efficacy in treating “mal delle reni”.

On 8 July he wrote to Cola, possibly in response to a letter from him asking for a new remedy. Evidently, the electuary had not worked as well as he had hoped. By this stage Bembo was obviously convinced of the efficacy of sheeps’ milk: “poi sapete quanto lungamente io usai il ver del latte di pecora, il quale fu quello, senza dubbio, che alla fin fine me ne liberò”. Furthermore, he

⁴² On the four humours as bodily fluids, see M. Stolberg, *Experiencing Illness*, 95–97.

⁴³ Fracastoro, *De contagione*, 149–150.

⁴⁴ *Pietro Bembo. Lettere*, vol. 4, 290–291, no. 2164. Also cited in Piovan, “Il testamento di Cola Bruno” 176.

⁴⁵ It may have been that recommended by Niccolò Massa: see below, note 47.

advised him to buy two sheep in order to make sure that he had a regular and fresh supply of milk! Bembo describes his own condition in dramatic terms: “Di quello m’incresce e duole infino nel mezzo dell’anima”, “io fui cento volte vicino alla morte”. However, as if this might be some comfort to Cola, he tells him that it is a common ailment: “Voi sapete quanto stessi male qui in Roma del male delle reni”, suggesting this was a popular treatment in Rome, presumably among his ecclesiastical colleagues.

Bembo was also solicitous in his advice to Cola, for he provided instructions on how to take it – “Pigliarete il latte ogni mattina caldo, come egli uscirà delle poppe della pecora”, and he was sure that this would cure him, as it had Bembo himself. He also said that it was important not just to take it a few times, but should be taken over a long period, which, as he attests, was no hardship, because the “medicina è piacevole e dilettevole”. He then recommended that he should lie down and sleep, which he regarded as the best cure, and reflects more general medical knowledge of the time about rest and sleep, as one of the Six Non Naturals as essential for health.⁴⁶

As was true of many early modern patients, while Bembo took the advice of doctors, he also permitted himself to adapt their advice according to his experience. Thus he noted that even though sleeping after the treatment was against medical advice, he should ignore doctors: “Il qual sonno, a giudizio mio, fu quello che più mi giovò: e pare che sia contro le regole delle medicine per quello che mi diceva il nostro maestro M. Ieronimo da Ogobbio [Girolamo Accoramboni]. Vorrei che sopra ciò non vi consigliaste con medico alcuno, ma vi metteste a prender questo latte senza punto pensarvi sopra, poscia che egli in me tanta e si manifesta pruova fece”.⁴⁷ In fact, Girolamo Accoramboni was a well-established physician practising in Rome and was an authority on the use of milk as a treatment, having published a *Tractatus de Lacte*, in 1536.⁴⁸

Bembo returned to the subject of their health in the autumn. On 25th September he wrote asking “mio Reverendo Maestro Cola Bruno” if he was suffering from “mal del fianco”, which was evidently a condition which they shared and had discussed in the past. Bembo talks in fulsome language about the merits of agrimony, or Eupatorio, which is “una cosa approvatissima e meravigliosa”, and

⁴⁶ See S. Cavallo, T. Storey, *Conserving Health in Early Modern Culture. Bodies and Environments in Italy and England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), Introduction.

⁴⁷ Pietro Bembo. *Lettere*, vol. 4, 312–315, no. 2199.

⁴⁸ E. Andretta, *Roma medica: anatomie d’un système médical au XVIe siècle*, (Rome: École Française de Rome, 2011), 219–284. Before Accoramboni, Niccolò Massa prescribed the use of milk as a treatment for *malfranciosati* in his book written in Latin in 1527 (*Liber Morbo Gallico*) and in Italian in 1566: *Il libro del mal francese, composto dall’Eccell. Medico, & Filosofo M. Nicolò Massa Venetiano. Nuouamente tradotto da un dottissimo Medico, di Latino, nella nostra lingua Italiana*, (Venice: Giordano Ziletti, 1566), 221, 244, 307.

had cured him from “due fistole”! Returning to the subject on 10th December, he also recommended agrimony for “dolori di fianco”; in fact, he had also advised the Cardinale di San Jacopo to take it and as a result “ne ha sentito grande giovamento”.⁴⁹

Again Bembo was careful to provide the methods of preparation and treatment. When writing in September, he recommended “far bollire della Agrimonia, e pigliar due dita di quella acqua tepida, leva tutto quel male”. Then, he tells Cola that, following the advice of “Maestro Federico nostro” [Federico Delfino], la bollitura de’ calare per lo terzo”.⁵⁰ He also says that it should be possible to purchase the medicine already prepared from a pharmacy, as had the Cardinale di San Jacopo, who had brought it from ‘certain friars’ in Rome, who were well equipped with distillation equipment. He suggests that Cola might purchase it from the Jesuits in Padua, who may still be producing it for sale, underlining that it is best if the solution of agrimony is prepared locally, so that it remains fresh, rather than being purchased and sent from further away.⁵¹

By December 1540, Bembo’s own health had clearly deteriorated because he reveals more about his own condition and treatment. He continued to suffer from his existing problems. Indeed he recounted that his symptoms became dramatic when he rode his horse; he has to urinate often and when he does his urine is black, a condition he evidently shared with Cola. It is interesting, moreover, that this too was a symptom common to Mal Francese.⁵² But there was also relief for his condition, which improved if he rested, as when he went on his habitual two-mile walk. He tells him that he has taken the “latte di pecora”, which had had a good effect in the past, but evidently was no longer efficacious to treat his deteriorating health. Having provided this information, he requests Cola to approach two doctors whom they both know, Maestro Paolo da Noale and Maestro Ieronimo da Urbino, for remedies for his condition. However, because he is still sick, he decided not to accompany the pope to Bologna, but to remain in Rome until mid-January.⁵³

⁴⁹ Pietro Bembo. *Lettere*, vol. 4, 324–325, no. 2210.

⁵⁰ Federico Delfino, mathematician, astrologer and friend of Pietro Bembo, whom Bembo mentioned in his second testament written in 1544, see: <http://cardinaliserenissima.uniud.it/joomla/109-bembo-pietro-regesto-2>

⁵¹ Pietro Bembo. *Lettere*, vol. 4, 324–325, no. 2210.

⁵² N. Massa, *Il libro del mal francese*, 71, 117, 165, 182, 263, 281.

⁵³ Pietro Bembo. *Lettere*, vol. 4, 333, no. 2220 (“Io non sono molto gagliardo con le mie rene nel cavalcare, però che se io cavalco sei od otto miglia fo una orina spessa e nera, come erano le vostre. Ho preso a bere la mattina, innanzi di, del latte di pecora, che a tempo di Leone mi guarì, come sapete. [...] Il mal mio è quello che io detto v’ho, e dappoi che ho cavalcato, e nel cavalcare, ancora ho una debolezza delle reni grande, la qual poi mi si parte a riposo, e così la spessezza e negrura dell’orina. Il camminare non mi nuoce gran fatto, nè fo quella orina

The main treatments he mentioned, sheep's milk and agrimony were well-known and recommended by physicians in their treatises.⁵⁴ However, Bembo only discusses the use of single, simple medicines, whereas physicians, combined them with other ingredients, as in the following passage in Niccolò Massa's *Il libro del mal francese*: "[...]ne le difficultà de la orina, et in molte obstruizioni l'agrimonia [...] Decottione de la chyna ad un'altro modo [...] altri la fanno bollire hor con semplici solventi [...] come è la betonica, iva, stecade, agrimonia, cicorea, e simili".⁵⁵

Conclusion

What, then, do we learn from Pietro Bembo's correspondence with his cousin Gian Matteo and his friend and secretary Cola concerning their health and sicknesses over the years between 1538 and 1541? Bembo is particularly concerned about Cola's various ailments, many of which Bembo himself came to suffer. Clearly, Cola was much more sick than Bembo, since, despite being ten years his junior, he died at the age of sixty-two in 1542. Bembo himself eventually succumbed to the same illness, dying at seventy-seven, on 18th January 1547, after suffering from a short fever.⁵⁶

As is evident from the correspondence, their illnesses grew them even closer together, despite being physically apart, especially as Cola looked after Bembo's children in Padua, while the latter was in Rome. Not only did they share common symptoms, but also throughout their lives they had shared intellectual interests, as was hinted in Bembo's short note to Cola on 10th December 1540:

M. Cola. Guardarate in quelli fogli avuti, di mano del Petrarca, che sono nella cassetta di cipresso, dove vi sono alcuni pezzi delli capitoli de' *Trionfi*, se vè quello della *Divinità*, e se vi sono quelli due versi:

"Vedrassi quanto in van cura si pone:
E quanto indarno s'affatica e suda".⁵⁷

ancora che io camini due miglia, sì come io fo molto spesso, e per dir più il vero, ogni dì che non sia consistoria e non piova.")

⁵⁴ *I discorsi di M. Pietro Andrea Matthioli Medico Sanese, ne i sei libri della materia medicinale di Pedacio Dioscoride Anazarbeo* (Venice: F. Valgriso, 1557; repr. Bologna: Arnaldo Forni Editore, 1984), 214–217, 478.

⁵⁵ Massa mentions that agrimony helps to clear obstructions as when somebody finds it difficult to urinate, see *Il libro del mal francese*, 176, 192, 298–299.

⁵⁶ G. Mazzuchelli, *Gli scrittori d'Italia cioè notizie storiche, e critiche intorno alle vite, e agli scritti dei letterati italiani del conte Giammaria Mazzuchelli Brescino*, vol. 2, parte 2, (Brescia: Giambatista Bossini, 1753), 748.

⁵⁷ Pietro Bembo. *Lettere*, vol. 4, 333, no. 2220.

Their correspondence also tells us much about the attitude of an educated Renaissance man towards medicine, treatment and the medical profession. Bembo's medical knowledge was part of a general knowledge, which would have been absorbed from home, from contacts with doctors at the Este courts of Mantua and Urbino, his medical colleagues in Padua, and subsequently at the papal court in Rome. He was also part of the more general culture of medical humanism, as reflected in his close friendship with Girolamo Fracastoro.

What is striking, though is that Bembo, does not talk about the conditions from which he and Cola suffered in humoral terms, but more as a collection of symptoms, especially dwelling on pain. As we have seen, the only exception to this rule is his letter of October 1519 to the Cardinal of S. Maria in Portico where he discussed the role of catarrh associated with "male delle reni". This is in contrast to contemporary physicians, such as Pietro Andrea Mattioli in his *Discorsi* or commentary on Dioscorides' *Materia medica*, published in 1544, three years before Bembo's death:

L'erba dell'Eupatorio è composta di parti sottili, e ha virtù fuori di manifesta calidità d'incidere, et di mondificare, lo onde apre, e netta le oppilationi del fegato: al quale giova anchor a fortificandolo con una certa parte che ha del costrettivo.⁵⁸

Mattioli's language here depends on the work of the great Roman physician Galen and more broadly refers back to the Greek and Arabic medical tradition. It is based on the humoral model whereby the body is seen as healthy when the four humours are in balance, but when they become blocked or corrupted or over-heated they can cause disease. According to this passage the virtues of euphorbia, among others, are that it has heating properties and can clear obstructions of the liver and fortify it when it is weak.

Even if Bembo did not normally talk in humoral terms, but rather concentrated on symptoms, he clearly did have knowledge of medicine reflected in the treatments he recommended to both his cousin and to Cola, as in his description of the preparation and dosage of both sheep's milk and agrimony, which evidently he had heard from other patients were successful. But one of the most significant cures which he adopted was Guaiacum, which, although initially associated with the cure of the Great Pox, it was also, like theriac, regarded as a cure-all for many intractable diseases. He presumably learned most about Guaiacum from his physician friend Girolamo Fracastoro and indeed, it would appear that as his health declined he came to rely more on the advice of a series of medical practitioners.

⁵⁸ *I discorsi di M. Pietro Andrea Matthioli*, 478.

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