A medicine for the vanity in the head[1]

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Medieval remedy books seem to have a recipe for everything, even for healing vanity. The present study is inspired by one of the medical texts which are preserved in Manuscript Ferguson 147 housed at Glasgow University Library. Among other items, the manuscript contains a wide hitherto unexplored collection of medical recipes. One of the recipes is entitled *Medicyn for þe vanyte in þe hede*. The same recipe has been documented in other medieval compendia, as it is shown in the samples provided. The etymology of the word *vanity* in this medical sense is explored in different languages in an attempt to trace back the meaning it has in the recipe to find out how such sense might have originated, as well as the further development of such meaning in English, as attested in the various sources.

Keywords: medical recipes; medieval medicine; vanity; Ms Ferguson 147

1. Introduction

Medieval remedy books seem to have a recipe for everything, even for healing vanity. The present study is inspired by a collection of medical recipes preserved in Manuscript Ferguson 147, housed at Glasgow University Library (hereafter GUL). GUL Ms Ferguson 147 contains 159 folios on paper and parchment, which are mainly devoted to medical recipes (from ff. 63 to 158). The focus is on the medical recipe collection found in folios 63r–91r. The hitherto unexplored compilation contains mostly medical recipes for different

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diseases, but prognostic texts and charms also form part of this miscellany. The structure of the recipes in Ms Ferguson 147 follows the traditional structure of the period: a) the title, b) the ingredients, c) the method of preparation, d) the application and, sometimes, e) an efficacy phrase (Eggins 1994: 40).

The arrangement of the recipes, however, does not follow the traditional *de capite ad pedem* ("from head to toe") order. The text begins with a recipe for scabs followed by others for a wide variety of medical symptoms and conditions, such as gout, red eyes, worms in your teeth, migraine and vanity in the head, among others.

2. Vanity in the head

The *Vulgate* verse "Vanitas vanitatum omnia vanitas" (Ecclesiastes 1:2;12:8) was rendered in King James Version as "Vanity of vanities; all is vanity". This sense of futility is the most frequently evoked every time the term is used nowadays. Notwithstanding, the word has undergone a significant semantic shift since it was adopted from Old French in the thirteenth century. In Present-Day English, it is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (hereafter OED) as "[t]he quality of being vain or worthless; the futility or worthlessness of something". In previous centuries it had another meaning. Our intention is to discuss the etymological origin and development of the word *vanity* in the medical sense in an attempt to trace back the meaning it had in medieval medical recipes to find out how such a meaning might have originated.

The title of the article is taken after one of the shortest recipes, *Medicyn for þe vanyte in þe hede*, which appears on GUL Ms Ferguson 147 (fol. 83r, lines 17–20). After the title, in very few lines the reader learns about the disorder. Following the author's instructions, the condition should disappear by means of the following:

> Take þe yois of walworte and salt and hony and
> wax and ensense and boyle hem to geder ouer
> the fuyre and grece þi hed ther wyþ

While reading this manuscript at the Glasgow University Library, it came to my mind how fascinating a remedy for such a common feature could be.

Likewise, the manuscript could contain other remedies for similar human qualities that have remained incurable despite modern technology and medical knowledge. In fact, other recipes for migraine and other diseases affecting the head are offered in the text.

Thanks to the *Middle English Dictionary* (hereafter MED), the reader finds out that in medieval times the condition could be either spiritual or physical, inasmuch as the word had different meanings: apart from designating "foolishness, arrogance, pride or madness", in Medicine it was used to mean "dizziness, light-headedness or simply an occurrence of dizziness". The MED provides the following quotations for such a meaning:

> a1400 Med.Bk. (2) (Roy 17.A.3) 66: An oynement for vanyte of the heued.
> a1450 (c1410) Lovel. Grail (Corp–C 80) 23.724: Asaied he Anon vpe forto stonde, For the vanite In his hed that hadde ben longe.
> c1450 Med.Bk. (2) (Add 33996) 185: Aqua vite [...] dystrueþ vanitees of þe heed.
> ?c1450 Stockh.PRecipes (Stockh 10.90) 51/10: A good onyment for vanyte in þe hed.
> ?c1450 Stockh.PRecipes (Stockh 10.90) 109/15: A good oynement for þe vanyte of þe heed.

From this moment onward, I wondered how the word *vanity*, coming from a long standing tradition from the Latin term *vanitas-atis*, could have acquired this medical meaning. The OED only records the prevailing modern meaning of "futility, worthlessness". Regarding the origin of the lexical unit, it does not provide much information, but claims the French adoption of the word, equivalent to other forms in other Romance languages:

> a OF. vanite (F. vanité, = It. vanità, Sp. vanidad, Pg. vaidade), ad. L. vānitāt-, vānitās, f. vānus vain a.

The OED also documents an obsolete sense of "emptiness, lightness; the state of being void or empty; inanity", and displays some of the quotations attested in the MED. The former also provides a late sixteenth-century instance in Levens's *Pathway to Health*. My own reading of Levens's work shows two recipes. The first one corresponds with the one in GUL Ms Ferguson 147: "Take the iuice of a wallwoort, Salt, hony, wax, & Ensence, boyle them together, and therewith annoint the temples" (1596: 6). This must have been a wide spread remedy during the Middle Ages and afterwards, as other sources acknowledge the same recipe for the same purpose. In fact, Alonso-Almeida

(2014: 81) also records the same recipe for vanity in GUL Ms Hunter 185 (fols. 22v–23r), which he interprets as "light-headedness, delirium":

> Also a good oynement for þe uanite of þe heued. [f. 23r] Tak jus of walwort, salt, hony, wex & encense, ana. Boile hem togedre ouer þe fuyre & þerwith anoynte þe heued & þe temples. He schal be hol by godes grace.

The ingredients are alike in the recipes: wallwort, salt, honey, wax and incense. Even the way of preparing them coincides, as they are meant to be boiled together and then grease the head, although the Ms Hunter 185 recipe specifies the temples must be anointed too and finishes with an efficacy phrase, whereby the patient is to be healed by God's grace.

Likewise, similar recipes are included in the *Middle English Medical Texts* compilation:

1. [}Vnguentum bonum pro vanitate capitis.}] take þe jus of walwort, and salt, &~ hony, &~ wax, &~ encense, and buyle hem to gedur ouer þe fuyre, and þer wyþ a noynte þe heued and þe temples.

2. Item a oynement for vanite of þe hed: Tac þe ious [\f. 37ra\] of walwrt and salt and hony and wax and recheles and wel hem togedere ouer þe fyr and smer þin hed þerwit. (Second Corpus Compendium, p.163)[2]

The first recipe in the *Middle English Medical Texts* is taken from Heinrich (1896: 66), who records this *Vnguentum bonum pro vanitate capitis* on folio 81r in British Library Manuscript Additional 33996. He collated this text with other medical manuscripts housed in the British Library; namely, Solane 3153, Royal Ms 17 AIII, Royal Ms 19674, Harleian 1600 and Sloane 405. In all these five manuscripts the same recipe for vanity in the head is attested with little variation. Additionally, other medieval manuscripts also record the same recipe for *vanitate capitis* or *vanite of þe hed*: Cambridge, Trinity College Ms O.2.13, fol. 120v (Mooney 1995: 88), British Library Ms Sloane 3285, fol. 93 (Loen-

[2] Second Corpus Compendium.MS: Corpus Christi College Cambridge 388, ff. 36va–48vb. Hunt, T. with M. Benskin: *Three Receptaria from Medieval England: The Languages of Medicine in the Fourteenth Century*. (Medium Ævum Monographs New Series XXI.) Oxford: The Society for the Study of Medieval Languages and Literature, 2001. pp.163–185.

Marshall 2005: 357), as well as Oxford, Bodleian Library Ashmole 1485, fol. 107v (Eldredge 2007: 96). All the ingredients are shared by the authors: wallwort, salt, honey, wax, and incense, which is not included in the first manuscript.

The second recipe by Levens (1596) is a complete treatment for vanity in the head, to comfort the brain and memory and for a fair face, which finishes with an efficacy phrase confirming that the treatment really works:

> For the vainitie of the head, and to wash the head, and to comfort the braine and memory, and for a fayre face. Take lye that is not so strong, and put two Pyls of Dreuges, the Pils of as many Citrons, the blossomes of Camomell, Bay leaues a handfull, of maiden-haire a handfull, of Egrimonie two or three vnces, of barlystraw chopped in paeces, a dishful of Fenegraeke, a pound of Wine lyes, tow or three dishfulls of broome blossoms, put all these into the iye, and mingle them together, and so wash the head therewith, and put a little Myrre and Cinamon: this is proued.

From the seventeenth century onwards no other recipes could be found for the condition affecting the head. The *Coruña Corpus*[3] records just one instance of the core meaning of "futility" in Elizabeth Wakefield's *An Introduction to the Natural History and Classification of Insects* (1816), corresponding to the Life Sciences section of the Corpus, whereas the comprehensive *Early Modern English Medical Texts* (2010) document several occurrences, but all of them refer to the primary meaning it has nowadays. In this sense, it can be found in Gideon Harvey's *Vanities of Philosophy and Physic* (1700).

Other western medical traditions also record this idea of placing the vanity disorder in the head even if it is a spiritual disease. Indeed, Saint Bernardine of Siena refers to "vanitas capitis mulieris est vexillum diaboli". Although he is referring to the spiritual condition, it is placed in the head. Nonetheless, in GUL Ms Ferguson 147 the recipe is not just aimed at women or, at least, there is no specific indication of this.[4]

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[3] I am grateful to Isabel Moskowich for granting access to this part of the *Coruña Corpus*, which has not been published yet.

[4] I am grateful to Bertha Rodríguez Rodilla for suggesting this idea to me. My thanks also to Ana Isabel Martínez Ferreira who let me know *vanitas capitis* could be related to another disorder known as *fumus capitis*. This thread was searched by consulting

Regarding the origin of this medical sense, the question to be answered now is whether *vanity* already had this medical meaning in Latin or was developed in the Romance languages, or just in French, or in Middle English. Apart from the MED, no other comprehensive Middle English dictionaries are available. Thus, the second possibility was to look up the word in several etymological French dictionaries, to check whether, apart from the straight meaning, the adjective *vain* or its derivative, *vanite*, recorded the medical sense. The consulted lexicographic works show the following results:

1. Bloch & von Warburg (1968: 662) indicate that in the Middle Ages *vain* also meant "faible, abattu".
2. Dazaut et al. (1969: 780) also record *vain* as "faible, épuisé", which can be rendered as "feeble, exhausted".
3. Rey (1994: 2209), when talking about *vanité*, refers to the fact that it can also be employed in the sense of "faiblesse du corps, défaillance"; that is, weakness, faintness.
4. *Le Trésor de la Langue Française Informatisé* includes no such a meaning, neither under the entry *vain* nor under vanité.
5. In the *Dictionnaire du Moyen Français* the noun *vainete* is recorded as "faiblesse, défaillance" *c.* 1380 Rem. Ex. d'a. fr., Gloss. lat. fr. (Montp., c. 1380, secordia, vainneté). Likewise, the adjective *vain*, when applied to a person or animal, means "deprived from energy". Hence, the different meanings of a) "faible, épuisé", b) "abattu, sans force morale", and c) "fatigant, épuisant" are attested.

It seems apparent that the meaning was present in Middle French and was imported into Middle English from this language. The fact that similar words exist in Spanish with this meaning made me extend the search to other Romance historical lexicographic works. In Spanish one finds terms like *evanescente*, *desvanecerse* (*desvanecimiento*, *devaneo*), all of them coming from the same Latin root *evanescere*, clearly related to *vain* and *vanitas*. Not every dictionary records this meaning, as happened with the French ones, but indeed some of them did:

1. Meyer-Lübcke (1972: 763) records *desvanecido* as "schwindelig", which means "dizzy, giddy".

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several classical medical authors, but clear relationship could not be established with the disease dealt with in this article.

2. Corominas & Pascual (1980: 738) document different derivatives from *vano*, such as *vanearse* in Galician "írsele a uno la cabeza" or in Spanish *devanear* "hablar desconcertado o desvariado", *devanecerse* "sentir vahído". All the senses highlight the idea of weakness in the head to the extent that one can either lose consciousness or sanity.
3. Covarrubias (1611/2006: 1511) associates *vanidad* with being so full of pride as to loose one's head, a kind of madness, or loss of consciousness ("desvanecimiento, presunción y especie de locura").
4. *Diccionario de Autoridades* (1984: 420) goes back to the Latin saying *debile caput*, *vel nutans* to illustrate the entry *cabeza vana*, defined as "la que está debil, ò flaca por enfermedad, ù demasiado trabajo" ("the head that is weak or feeble due to disease or excessive work").
5. Herrera (1996: 519) states that in medical treatises, *desvanecimiento* and *esvanescimiento* are always associated with "headache and faintness": "La sangría de las dos venas de la postrera parte de la cabeça de cada qual de los costados que llaman colodrillo aprouecha contra el dolor de esvanescimiento de la cabeça e alienación del sentido" (*Compendio de la Humana Salud*, 1494).

Finally, the consulted Latin etymological dictionaries are witnesses of the primary meaning, "pride, foolishness". In this sense it is also attested by Ernout & Meillot (1951: 1260), de Vaan's (2008: 653) and Valpy (1828: 494–495). However, Du Cange's glossary records this idea of "weakness in the head" or "exhaustment", illustrated in the following quotation:

> Lassitudo, virium defectio, Gall. Abatement. Consuet. Fontanell. MSS.:
> Nobis autem conceditur post matutinas redire ad lectum, ne somnum quem corpori fragili subtraheremus, resumere per diem lassitudine et Vanitate compelleremur.

This could be translated as "[t]o grow weary of, the defection of the strength, [...] However, we are granted to go back to bed after matins, which the body is weak, they should not be deprived of sleep, and resume it by day, and the weariness and vanity had compelled us".

Other Romance languages, such as Italian, show similar meanings in *vanus* or its derivatives. Thus, in Italian *svanire*, *svenire*, and henceforth *svenimento* means "to lose power", as shown in *Dizionario Etimologico Online*. This idea of weakness could have developed from its sense of lacking power. Likewise, the Indo-European dictionaries consulted provide no explanation of the different meanings. By looking up the word *vain* in the *Proto-Indoeuropean English Dictionary* one can learn that Latin *vanus* derives from Indo-European *wonós*

or *wans* meaning "lacking, wanting", but no further development is provided. Likewise, Roberts & Pastor (1996: 55) document this meaning as well as that of "emptiness". It follows from here that, just by consulting lexicographic works, it is hard to assert whether the medical meaning was present in classical Latin or was developed in the Middle Ages.

3. Conclusions

Medieval remedy books are of interest to academia, especially if they remain unexplored, as it is the case of the medical collection in Glasgow University Library Manuscript Ferguson 147. The recipes in the manuscript show remedies for a wide variety of medical conditions. One of them is "vanity in the head". *Vanity* seems to be a disease that physicians have tried to heal since long ago, as documented in the different medieval receptaria explored. In vain, the present piece of work has tried to unveil the origin of its double meaning, especially this sense referring to the medical disorder. Nonetheless, it is hoped to have made clear the fact that this weakness was already present in Latin and was inherited in the different Romance languages, as attested in the various lexicographic references mentioned above. From Middle French the meaning was exported to Middle English along with the more straight meaning of "emptiness". The sense of "dizziness, feeling feeble", especially in the head, has been documented until the late sixteenth century in English, as the recipe collections used have demonstrated. This meaning is still present in other western languages, but it fell out of use in the English language at some imprecise time from the seventeenth century onwards.

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