

## Notes and Queries

### Tooth-Worms

Consider the following account of an alleged cure for the toothache in West Friesland in the late nineteenth century. It was then widely believed that the cause of an aching tooth was a worm that had its seat there. About 1860, in the town of Franeker, the folklorist Waling Dykstra observed some cheap-jacks who had set up shop on elevated ground in the marketplace and, with much hullabaloo, were offering for sale little bottles of brown fluid as an infallible remedy for the toothache. They did not draw teeth, but invited a sufferer from toothache to come up and take a mouthful of the brown fluid, to hold it for a few moments in his mouth, against the offending tooth, and then to spit it out into the dent made in the crown of an old felt hat. One of the men then fished about in the sputum with the tip of a little knife, and eventually speared a tiny maggot that was then shown to all the onlookers who were able to see it. The story went that the maggot had come out of the aching tooth, thus providing convincing evidence for the effectiveness of the fluid. The little bottles were then purchased with enthusiasm. When sales diminished, a new patient was found and the whole procedure was repeated. Whether the patients were really cured we are not told. In any case, our interest lies rather with the tooth-inhabiting maggots or worms that our cheap-jack claimed to have brought to light (Dykstra, 1895, 2, p. 225).

This account is of course far from unique, and we do not need to cross the North Sea to encounter its like. Here is a counterpart from roughly the same period, from Sussex, where an informant told Hilderic Friend of an effectual remedy for the toothache. When pain arose from a decayed tooth, she placed a few senna leaves on a plate. A light was applied, and as the leaves burned, she inhaled the smoke. Alternatively, the leaves could be steeped in boiling water and the steam inhaled. Before long, little worms crawled out of their hiding-places and fell, suffocated, into the vessel. The pain ceased forthwith (Friend, 1884, p. 365).

Steve Roud tells us that this line of thought was so widespread that, especially in Scotland, the toothache was simply *the* worm (Roud, 2003, p. 483). Alternatively, it was *worm i' the cheek* or *onbeast*, in which the prefix, like its counterpart in Dutch *ondier* and German *untier*, suggests monstrosity. We also note Roud's remark that "worms" seen as causing toothache and other ailments have been identified as one of the few areas in which early medical theory followed Teutonic tradition rather than drawing upon classical sources. With this in mind, we quote Cockayne's translation of the *Leechdoms* on "tooth worms":

"For tooth worms, take acorn meal and henbane seed and wax, of all equally much, mingle these together, and work into a wax candle, and burn it, let it reek into the mouth, put a black cloth under, then will the worms fall on it."

A similar remedy requires the patient to hold his head over a bowl containing a still steaming infusion of herbs, and to yawn over it: "then the worms shall fall into the bowl" (Cockayne, 1865, 2, p. 51).

Such practices persisted. Here is John Gerard on henbane, *Hyoscyamus niger*, notorious as a poison, as indeed the *bane* of its English name suggests (1597, p. 284):

“The seede is vsed of mountibancke toothdrawers which runne about the countrey, for to cause woormes come foorth of mens teeth by burning it in a chafing dish with coles [coals, charcoal], the partie holding his mouth ouer the fume thereof: but some craftie companions to gaine money conuey small lute strings into the water, perswading the patient that those small creeping beasts came out of his mouth or other parts, which he intended to ease.”

To be properly assessed, such accounts call for the intervention of botanists. In the circumstances, we merely observe that the senna leaves of my second paragraph are a laxative, here presumably seen as having a loosening effect somewhat similar to the more usual one. As for the henbane, we follow Richard Mabey in his observation that it can have hallucinatory effects that would lend themselves to exploitation by “mountibanckes”. Mabey also tells us that it was early prescribed as a specific for toothache “because of a strong resemblance between the seed-heads and a row of molars” (Mabey, 1996, p. 301). The resemblance is in fact striking, as can be seen from the accompanying illustration. Moreover, in the heat and humidity of the inhaling procedure, the molar-shaped seed-pods begin to burst, and some of the hundreds of tiny black seeds they contain begin to germinate, each becoming a thread-like structure that could easily be taken for a tiny worm (Hubmann, 2008, pp. 18-19), or counterfeited using Gerard’s “small lute string”.

So far, we have provided no account of how folk medicine sees tooth-worms as coming to have their seat in the tooth they infect. In a diary entry for October 1817, we find a description along by now familiar lines. For the treatment of toothache, we are told, dried henbane seeds are burnt, and the smoke is directed towards the affected tooth, thus allegedly killing the grubs that have taken up residence there. “Certain minute ephemerae of the butterfly species flying about are accidentally taken into the mouth and - they then make a nidus in a rotten tooth.” Here they deposit their eggs. In due course, minute grubs hatch, which immediately begin feeding on the nerves, causing intolerable pain (Fendall and Crutchley, 1933, pp. 104-105). This seems to echo the Swiss professor of medicine Carolus Musitanus, who at the beginning of the eighteenth century in his encyclopedia of medicine claimed that flies and other insects were inadvertently taken into the mouth with food and there laid their eggs, which under the influence of warmth and humidity hatched into the maggots otherwise known as tooth-worms (Musitanus, 1701, 1, p. 343; cf. Hubmann, 2008, p. 45). Further relevant accounts will perhaps help us towards a fuller picture.

## References

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