

Girls in Green

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In *Romeo and Juliet*, Capulet screams at his daughter Juliet, “Out, you green-sickness carrion,” when she refuses to marry the man he has chosen for her. Shakespeare was referring to a malady believed to occur commonly in young women: green-sickness.

This worrisome condition was caused by the cessation of menses. Contemporary medical theory reasoned that the stoppage of menstrual blood led to dire consequences, since menstrual blood was full of harmful substances that the body sought to expel.

Young women with this ailment turned a delicate shade of green or white because blood left all other parts of the body and converged in the womb or liver. The poet Thomas Carew wrote, “Stay, coward blood, and do not yield/To thy pale sister beauty’s field,” in protest of a sufferer’s pallor.

These young women developed cravings for unusual items. They relished drinking vinegar and eating dirt, ashes, and chalk. English books frequently added oatmeal to the list of inappropriate foods; oatmeal was thought to be an outlandish food choice, eaten only by the Scots.

Women with green-sickness often felt despair and sometimes expressed themselves in the language of religion. One woman described how the devil himself tempted her, showing her how to pick feathers out of



ROMEO & JULIET

Courtesy: Milton S. Eisenhower Library, The Johns Hopkins University

her pillow and swallow them.

Treatment for green-sickness was complicated. The vicious humors that congregated in the backed-up blood needed to be warmed and thinned, so many doctors recommended bloodletting and warming remedies. The sovereign remedy, however, was marriage or, more specifically, sexual intercourse.

Sex, because it warmed the body, helped dissolve thick humors and promote menstrual flow. On a metaphorical level, green-sickness was a disease of morbid appetite. Girls with green-sickness were figuratively as well as literally “green” (that is, inexperienced); the ailment was often called “the virgin’s disease.”

Marriage (intercourse) was supposed to satisfy a young woman’s pent-up sexual desires. Afterwards, an appetite for appropriate food and drink would return.

A girl with green-sickness was regarded as physically ready for marriage because she had reached menarche. In Shakespeare’s day, however, women usually married in their mid-20s, Juliet’s youth notwithstanding. Historians have suggested that it was in the 17th century that upper-class young women began to exercise considerable veto power over prospective partners, just as Juliet attempted to do. When reading medical texts that promote marriage as the cure for green-sickness, it is difficult to avoid the suspicion that some young women may have manipulated the illness for their own reasons, and used their ailments as a way to follow the dictates of their hearts.

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