

A poet's choice: *aquosus languor* and *lymphaticus error* in the *Liber medicinalis* by Q. Serenus

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Having reached the middle of his *Liber medicinalis*, and, respectively, the middle of a human body – the abdomen – in his project to list medicines for the ailments of all body parts, from head to heel, *a capite ad calcem*, Q. Serenus dedicates a separate chapter to dropsy. The collection of various recipes (borrowed mostly from Pliny) is preceded by a short aetiology:

«Grievous dropsy grows from an injured liver or spleen, or after a fever which has dried up the spinal cord, or following greedy consumption of ice drinks. As the illness develops, the water begins to swell inside, separating the miserable skin from the interiors.»¹

Further on, while listing cures, Q. Serenus calls the disease *lymphaticus error*, and once again, in the last line of the chapter (26, 512), *languor aquosus*. Doing so, the question remains regarding water but each time it is given a different name. What water it is? What humour or fluid gathers under the 'miserable' skin of a patient suffering with dropsy?

1. *Aquosus languor*

At first glance, *aquosus languor* appears to be, if not the most accurate, certainly the most technical definition. Being a «universal signifier», the idea of water is involved in the language of pharmaceutical recipes' προγραφαί² to determine the degree of density of some bodily fluids. To say, as Sextus Placitus does³, that goat's milk is good for men whose semen flows spontaneously and is watery (*aquosum est*) (giving this as a reason for which women do not conceive), means blaming a degree of deviation from the normal density of semen – watery, less dense and more fluid, than usual – for a failure to conceive. The medicine had to cure the symptom, restore normalcy, in this case the 'normal' density of seminal fluid.

1 Ser., *med.* 493-496: *corrupti iecoris uitio uel splenis acerbus / crescit hydrops aut cum siccatae febre medullae / atque auidae fauces gelidum traxere liquorem. / tum lymphā interius uitio gliscente tumescit / secernens miseram proprio de uiscere pellem*. The translation is mine, as well as those that follow, unless otherwise indicated. On the author see Smolak, Fischer, 1989.

2 For the term see Fabricius, 1972, p. 24-29.

3 Plac., *med.*, 5 β 70 (CMG IV, p. 252 Howald-Sigerist): *Ad eos, quibus semen fluet non optantibus et aquosum est, unde efficitur, ut feminae non concipiant*.

Similarly, the expression *uinum aquosum*⁴ from the dietetic precepts by Philumenus, does not require special explanations. As is known, in antiquity wine was diluted with water and the consumption of it thus was considered civilized; unmixed wine was a sign of intemperance that could distinguish an individual or a whole culture (notoriously, the Scythians). But wine was also forged, namely by adding water, and to prevent such deception Cato mentions the presence of an expert (*uir bonus*), who had the task of surveying the tastings of wine which was to be sold in barrels⁵. Florentinus (200-250 CE)⁶, a Greek writer from the Roman Bithynia and the author of *Georgica* in at least 11 books, quoted in *Geoponica*, gives us some interesting information about testing wine in relation to selling. Florentinus lists a number of ways to recognize if the wine has been watered down; by, for example, throwing an apple (better a wild pear), or a locust, or a cicada into the jar: if these items float, it is the proof that the wine is genuine; if not the wine contains water⁷. The suspicious wine can also be poured into a frying pan with heated oil – if the wine contains water, it will jump on the pan, producing noise and bubbles⁸. Such experiments were necessary as an expert cannot trust his palate alone – Florentinus tells how some wine producers leave cheese and nuts out for wine tasters, hoping to seduce them with these morsels and thus deteriorate their ability to distinguish between good and bad wine⁹. Yet visitors of ordinary taverns did not have to resort to apples and locusts; they merely had to taste the wine in order to understand if it was excessively diluted with water. This was the case, for example, for those customers of a tavern in *Regio I* in Pompeii, who failed to get drunk as they intended. In their irritation and desire to have the last say, they wrote on the wall the famous graffiti: «May your lies, innkeeper, turn against you: you sell us water, but you yourself drink unmixed wine.»¹⁰

It seems that while using the expression *uinum aquosum*, Philumenus assumes his reader is able to spot excessive dilution of wine when he does not consider it necessary to give extra details regarding the degree of water in wine¹¹. But Q. Serenus, when he uses the expression *aquosus languor*, has a more complex association in mind. It does not matter how technical this locution may appear; Giovan Battista Morgagni (1682 – 1771), the famous Italian anatomist, had already spotted here a quotation from Horace¹²: «By self-indulgence, debilitating dropsy worsens, nor can one's thirst be slaked unless the root cause of it has vanished from his veins and aqueous languor from his pale body.»¹³

Addressing Sallustius Crispus, Horace praises him for being temperate and not giving too much value to money; the opposite, greed, is depicted in the term of medical symptoms: a

4 Philum. *med.* 1 (p. 111, 6-7 Mihaileanu Mihaileanu): *cum uino aquoso et austero.*

5 Cato, *agr.* 148.

6 Rogers, 2008, p. 331.

7 Florent. *apud Geopon.* 7, 8, 3.

8 Democrit. *apud Geopon.* 7, 8, 7.

9 Florent. *apud Geopon.* 7, 7, 6.

10 *CIL* IV, 3948: *Talia te fallant utinam me(n)dacia, copo: / tu ue(n)des acuam et bibes ipse merum.*

11 Or in breast-milk; see Cael. *Aur., gyn.* 1, 125, 1147 Drabkin-Drabkin: *aquosi sunt lacti.*

12 Morgagni, 1763, p. 201.

13 Hor. *carm.* 2, 2, 13-16: *crescit indulgens sibi dirus hydrops / nec sitim pellit, nisi causa morbi / fugerit uenis et aquosus albo / corpore languor;* transl. by S. Alexander.

greedy person is like a dropsy sufferer who cannot stop drinking, never giving his own body enough time to free itself from the excess liquid before he adds even more. Horace's choice to use *aquosus languor*, «the watery languishing» (preferring it to, e.g., *morbus*), without doubts aims not just to name dropsy, but to emphasize its debilitating nature.¹⁴

Thus, what seems to be a technical term, *aquosus languor*, turns out to be a poetical metaphor: in describing a symptom in his medical poem, Q. Serenus uses an expression that Horace used as a metaphor while describing a moral defect in medical terms. Undoubtedly, the right to resort to metaphors is not an exclusive prerogative of any particular genre: not only poets, but prosaic authors too can make recourse to comparisons when they write about medicine. As many works have been written on the issue of scientific writing in the broader context of literature in general¹⁵, one can skip the justification of Q. Serenus for having quoted a poet while describing the symptoms of a disease. Having briefly noted the relevance of this quote by Horace – which Q. Serenus thus returned to the medical context from where it was once extracted – we can focus instead on the practice itself of such collages. It goes without saying that they obey the author's logic: it is interesting that from Horatius' entire passage Q. Serenus takes only this last extract, leaving aside the entire original moralizing context. With this description of greed as the insatiable thirst of a dropsy patient, a long tradition will start, using this image of this disease for moralizing purposes. For instance, Dante describes Master Adam of Brescia in *Inferno* as being afflicted with oedema because of his sin – coin counterfeiting: his body has lost its original shape, becoming «like a lute», his lips are open with a thirst which will last forever:

«I saw one made in fashion of a lute,
If he had only had the groin cut off
Just at the point at which a man is forked.

The heavy dropsy, that so disproportions
The limbs with humours, which it ill concocts,
That the face corresponds not to the belly,

Compelled him so to hold his lips apart
As does the hectic, who because of thirst
One tow'rds the chin, the other upward turns.»¹⁶

Q. Serenus leaves untouched the original context of Horatius' verse and carefully removes only what he needs right now, namely the conclusion of his own verse and the whole chapter on oedema: *unguine quo frangit uires languoris aquosi* («which ointment [*scil.* of heated wine with fern roots] will break the force of watery illness»). Consequently, he makes no mention of what is constantly repeated by all authors – Greek and Latin – which is that

14 Harrison, 2017, p. 65.

15 See, e.g., Skoda, 1988; von Staden, 1995; Mazzini, 1998; *id.*, 2000; Langslow, 1999; Asper, 2009, p. 15.

16 Dante, *Inferno*, XXX, 49–57: *Io vidi un, fatto a guisa di lèuto pur ch'elli avesse avuta l'anguinaia / tronca da l'altro che l'uomo ha forcuto. / La grave idropesi, che si dispaia / le membra con l'umor che mal converte, / che 'l viso non risponde a la ventraia, / faceva lui tener le labbra aperte / come l'etico fa, che per la sete / l'un verso 'l mento e l'altro in sù rinverte;* (transl. by H. W. Longfellow).

recovery from dropsy requires temperance and self-control¹⁷. Celsus, for instance, is very explicit in this regard:

«It is relieved more easily in slaves than in freemen, for since it demands hunger, thirst, and a thousand other troublesome treatments and prolonged endurance, it is easier to help those who are easily constrained than those who have an unserviceable freedom. But even those who are in subjection, if they cannot exercise complete self-control, are not brought back to health.»¹⁸

Great willpower was primarily required to endure the torments of thirst and strive to not drink. A compassionate Pliny mentions medicines which can influence thirst and remove it¹⁹. Q. Serenus pays tribute to the tradition that linked the emergence of fluid accumulations in the body with immoderate drinking, but instead of somehow paraphrasing, for example, Ovid – *quo plus sunt potae, plus sitiunt aquae* (*fast.* 1, 216) – he prefers to blame the throat rather than its owner; he puts forward drinking as the last of the causes of dropsy: «because of ice drinks poured into a greedy throat» (496). He inculpates the throat and feels sorry for the skin: the throat is greedy (*auidae fauces*) in his poem, and skin is miserable (*miseram pellem*)²⁰. In effect, as Q. Serenus personifies the individual parts of patient's body, he can afford such a poetic expression as *lymphaticus error* in order to name the dropsy but not the mental state of a person (as one would expect).

2. *Lymphaticus error*

Starting with Hippocrates, there is quite a developed classification of oedemas, in which each species is attributed to some affected organ²¹. In the first lines of his chapter on dropsy, Q. Serenus names only four of all the possible causes of oedema, and this laconicism reflects the logic of his book, which mainly emphasised medicines, but also the logic behind dropsy therapy in general – most authors concurred that, whatever the original cause of the dropsy was, its main manifestation was an accumulation of liquid in one place of the body and the physician's task was mainly to dispel this congestion. Their strategy consisted in forcing the patient to cast out this liquid through the use of purgative medicines and a diet of hard foods, while drink was to be given only as needed to sustain life. Furthermore, excess fluid could evaporate from the patient's body through perspiration, something obtained not only through

17 See Mazzini, 1997, p. 318.

18 Cels., 3, 21, 2–3: *Facilius in seruis quam in liberis tollitur, quia, cum desideret famem, sitim, mille alia taedia longamque patientiam, promptius is succurritur, qui facile coguntur, quam quibus inutilis libertas est. Sed <ne> i quidem, qui sub alio sunt, si ex toto sibi temperare non possunt, ad salutem perducuntur*; transl. by W. G. Spencer. On water in general in Celsus, see Gallego Pérez, López Férrez, 1994.

19 *E.g., nat.* 20, 20; 21; 39, etc.

20 Shall we say, Q. Serenus is unlikely to judge those suffering from illness, but rather he sympathizes with them: for example, his introduction to Chapter IV, *Ad capillos tinguendos* (43-55), is full of sincere pity for the human condition: «if someone is ashamed of old age and would like to hide gray hair, etc.».

21 Sconocchia, 2010; Patterson, 2003.

physical exercise, as Celsus writes, but also with heated sand or in *thermae calidarium*, but then again actual baths were forbidden as was any contact with moisture²².

In a word, since the time of Heraclitus and the riddles he put to doctors on whether they could turn wet weather into a drought²³, there has been no doubt that the human body contains water; a liquid that can transform into sweat or become a part of any other corporeal fluid, to a greater or lesser extent. In the case of dropsy, there is an excess of this water and physicians try to flush it out through the traditional routes of exit: for example, by seeking to evaporate it in the form of sweat or to cause it to flow out through special plasters on the skin, or forcing it out through the oral consumption of purgative medicines. If authors disagree on the reasons behind the development of dropsy, they are at least unanimous on the observations of its manifestation: there is always a swelling on the body, filled with water and air in different proportions: «Sometimes the water is drawn all together within, and moves as the body moves, so that its movement can be observed.»²⁴

It seems that Q. Serenus refers to these movements as his *lymphaticus error*.

As is known, of the three most-used terms for water – *aqua*, *lymph*a and *unda* – the first denotes water in general, the second means mainly limpid water, and the third means prevalently the abundance of water, for example, sea-water. Poets, however, easily mix these representations up, as the language of Muses does not care too much for being clear to everyone. For instance, it is namely *unda* that means *hydrops* in Ovid: *sic quibus intumuit suffusa uenter ab unda* («so those, whose belly swells with abundance of water» [i.e. dropsy], *fast.* 1, 215). From these three terms Q. Serenus most often uses *lymph*a, but, in his *Liber medicinalis*, it also denotes sea water as well, he just adds a corresponding poetic epithet or simply says *lymph*a *marina*²⁵. It is no wonder therefore that with such a free and poetic handling of his favourite name for water, Q. Serenus would coin a unique and a very expressive name for the dropsy: *lymphaticus error*.

The adjective *lymphaticus* is a very old word in Latin, testified by Plaut. (*Poen.* 345–6) and since then given the meaning of religious ecstasy and madness, sent by nymphs and other water deities, whose victims move chaotically without scope (as, for instance, *errauere lymphatici* in *Sen. nat.* 6, 29, 3), a state quite synonymous with the uncontrollable behaviour of hydrophobia²⁶. From the whole context of the *Liber medicinalis*, however, it is quite clear that *lymphaticus error* does not mean a person who is mad or possessed by spirits and would therefore require a treatment of hellebore, the proverbial cure for madness; on the contrary, Q. Serenus wanted to thus indicate the movement of water under the skin of a dropsy patient, and hellebore would be able to stop this movement and expel the water thanks to its purgative qualities. Gabriel Hummelberg (ca. 1490 – 1544), the Renaissance editor of

22 Cels., 3, 21, 6-7.

23 E.g. Diog. Laert., 9, 4, for more testimonies see Fairweather, 1973; Grmek, 1989, p. 41-42.

24 Cels., 3, 21, 1-2: *modo intus in unum aqua contrahitur et moto corpore ita mouetur, ut impetus eius conspici possit*; transl. by W. G. Spencer.

25 Ser., *med.* 680 (*Nereia lymph*a), 438 (*lymph*is ... *marinis*), cf. 869 (*pelagi lymph*is).

26 Cf. also Liv., 10, 28, 10 (*lymphaticus pauor*); Plin., *nat.* 26, 52 (*lymphatica somnia*), 25, 60. On nymphs sending madness see Fabiano, 2011; *ead.*, 2013.

the *Liber medicinalis*, glossed *lymphaticus* as *aquosus* and was of the opinion that Q. Serenus thus named the disease to which the chapter is devoted²⁷.

Are the word groups *aquosus languor* and *lymphaticus error* synonyms? Strictly speaking, no: the first one refers more to the content and the aqueous nature of the dropsy; the last one accentuates more unexplained and frightening movements of water within the body. Still, at the same time, these two names together represent the nature of the disease. As is well-known, the flexion *-osus* indicates both abundance and similarity²⁸: dropsy is called an *aquosus languor* because it represents a big congestion of liquid, recalling water. The second phrase, *lymphaticus error*, points to water as well, but more than the liquid itself, it indicates its movements in the body, its frenetic wandering, which medicines are able to control.

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27 Hummelberg, 1581, p. 150v.

28 Ernout, 1949; Gourevitch, 2000; Langslow, 2000, p. 340-345; Adams, 2013, p. 571-577.

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