

## THE SUMMONER'S OCCUPATIONAL DISEASE

Sir,

I have read Dr. Garbáty's article, 'The Summoner's Occupational Disease' in *Medical History* (7, 348–58) with great interest. Although he may well be correct in his conclusions I believe that to diagnose syphilis as the disease from which the summoner suffered is too facile and that it could have been some other condition.

It is true that if there were occupational hazards for those who worked as summoners syphilis would rank high among them. But what evidence is there that the eruption on his face, his hoarse voice and his madness were the result of his occupation? The evidence produced by Dr. Garbáty is sound and reasonable but not conclusive. It is that Chaucer intended the reader to recognize the venereal origin of the Summoner's disease, 'the essence of the whole satire'. As Dr. Garbáty puts it: 'The face of the corrupt Summoner, watch-dog of morality, marks his own lechery.' This is possibly so, but an alcoholic lecher with feelings of guilt may well develop severe rosacea which would be aggravated by garlic, onions and leeks.

The physical signs were a red face with pimples, nodes on the cheeks, slit eyes, scabby and hairless eyebrows, and alopecia in the beard area. He had a hoarse voice and was as 'mad as a hare'. If we assume that syphilis was present in Europe at that time—and there is still some doubt about this—there must either have been a mutation in the characteristics of the disease or a new variant was introduced by Columbus' sailors to account for its epidemiology in the sixteenth century. However, for lack of information, we can only assess the Summoner's condition in terms of syphilis as it has been described in the last four centuries. Without doubt the appearance of the Summoner's face could have been caused by syphilis in the secondary stage and so could his hoarseness. His madness is different and would be more in keeping with a tertiary manifestation. Meningeal neuro-syphilis causes depression and severe headaches and the patient is obviously ill. This does not suggest a man like the Summoner, who was of the manic type. The fact that he had been treated with mercury by inunction does not suggest that syphilis had been diagnosed, for it had been used for many centuries for a variety of skin conditions but not for syphilis, as far as we know, until early in the sixteenth century. Moreover, the lack of response to this therapy cast doubts on a diagnosis of syphilis, which would have improved with this treatment.

The appearance of his face could well have been the result of leprosy, *lupus vulgaris* or *rosaceous tuberculide*. Hoarseness might occur with any of these conditions. The fact that he was an alcoholic lecher who was rather mad does not invalidate these diagnoses. I believe that we must still keep an open mind about the Summoner's disease and I cannot accept Dr. Garbáty's statement that it is 'a great pity that not one student anthology or edition of Chaucer mentions the venereal origin of the Summoner's disease, a quality which the author so obviously intended the reader to recognize'. It would be quite unjustifiable to use the case of the Summoner to support the view that European syphilis was pre-Columbian.

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5 November 1963

[I agree with much of what Dr. Anning says and that it should be said. I think one of the purposes of publishing an article is to provoke interest and discussion about controversial points. I do, however, think that the medical reader may underestimate considerably the significance of Chaucer's association of the Summoner with the symptoms described in Garbáty's article. Every touch of characterization in Chaucer is subtle and calculated and I think Garbáty has made a useful point by bringing this to our notice. Whatever disease-complex afflicted the Summoner, Chaucer evidently thought it to be of venereal origin. *Editor.*]