Practical medicine as education of the body. Thomas Elyot’s *Castel of Helth* (1539-1541)

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Abstract

In 1539 Thomas Elyot, humanist and diplomat at the court of Henry VIII, published *The Castel of Helth*, the first *regimen sanitatis* written *ex novo* in English. Not a simple repeat of medical commonplaces drawn by Galenic tradition, this work was also aimed to non-physicians and people who could not read Latin. Its prescriptions acted on moral habits and pointed to educate the reader toward reasoning and virtue. By appealing to the national pride of the English language, Elyot hoped to minder the vocation to excess in the ruling class, which was at that time so pernicious to the public weal.

Keywords: English Humanism, Tudor age, Galen, Public weal, Moral education.

Resumen

La medicina preventiva como educación del cuerpo. Thomas Elyot’s *Castel of Helth* (1539-1541)

En 1539, Thomas Elyot, humanista y diplomático en la corte de Enrique VIII, publicó *The Castel of Helth*, el primer *regimen sanitatis* escrito *ex novo* en inglés. No es una simple repetición de lugares médicos comunes dibujados por la tradición galénica, sino que este trabajo está parcialmente basado en la cultura alimentaria e higiénica inglesa y está claramente dirigido a personas que no son médicos y personas que no podían leer latín. Sus prescripciones sobre la dieta y la salud física actúan sobre los hábitos morales y apuntan a educar al lector sobre el razonamiento y las virtudes. Al apelar al orgullo nacional de la lengua inglesa ennoblecida a través del sujeto
médico, *The Castel of Helth* esperaba atender la vocación al exceso en la clase dominante, tan perniciosa para el bienestar público.

**Palabras clave:** Humanismo inglés, Período Tudor, Galeno, Bienestar público, Educación moral.

**Introduction**

Say, Goddess, that persidest over History; who it was that first advanced in the Field of Battel. *Paracelsus*, at the Head of his Dragoons, observing *Galen* in the adverse Wing, darted his Javelin with a mighty Force, which the brave *Antient* received upon his Shield, the Point breaking in the second fold\(^1\).

Jonathan Swift published the satiric *Battle of the Books* in 1704 as an Appendix to *A Tale of a Tub*. In *Battle of the Books*, Swift described the books kept in the St. James Library as being grouped in two armies, representing the contemporary “cultural” parties of the Ancients and the Moderns, and they were challenging each other to finally call a winner\(^2\). After a rambling preamble, Paracelsus, champion of the “modern” medicine and commander of a troop of Swiss knights, made the first play and hit the Ancient Galen with an arrow. Swift did not really care about identifying a winner; rather, he was interested in ridiculing and in putting on the ropes the dynamics of the literary dispute, so he did not allow

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\(^2\) The harshest phase of the *querelle* had run out in the mid 1690s and one of the most influential English contenders was statesman William Temple, to whom Swift was the secretary. Temple had declared his support to the Ancients in *Essay upon the ancient and modern learning* (1690).
the reader to witness the battle’s conclusion. His personal involvement in the quarrel was going to emerge much more vehemently in later writings, notably in the third book of *Gulliver’s Travels*. And several more times he addressed his sharp satire against medicine, demonstrating that Paracelsus’ dart maybe did wound Galen, and yet somehow, at the outset of the Enlightenment, the Greek authority still stood.

No doubt that things were changing, and the public debates that fired up among intellectuals and academics hastened the pace of science. Especially in matters of medicine, 18th century satire was exactly the genre to endorse the breakthrough in empirical practices. Nonetheless, throughout the Tudor and the Stuart ages, English medicine adhered to the classic heritage, possibly conveyed by the humanistic translations. This was true for the academies, where, under the Tudors, instruction in medicine was “medieval in character and in some respects below the level attained at the great northern Italian universities in the fourteenth centuries.” And it was truer than ever in the popular comprehension and practice of medicine, because beyond the oral transmission of practical knowledge that took place in every family and courtyard, English people, as long as they could read, had disposal to many texts of Galenic medicine written specifically for them – for non-physicians, in the

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3 The distinctiveness of Laputa, the country which Gulliver visits in during third journey, lies in its cultural life and it is a sharp parody of English institutions and academies (including the Royal Society).


5 In the Tudor Age, only Oxford and Cambridge offered medical degrees.

vernacular. Those were the equivalent of the medieval Latin *regimina sanitates* – handbooks of preventive medicine that focused on diet, lifestyle, and loose remedies, like infusions, decoctions, poultices, etc.

Such works began to circulate soon after their Latin predecessors had been translated in English, and *The Castel of Helth* by Sir Thomas Elyot (1490-1546), probably first printed in 1536\(^7\), seems to have been the most influential. With “very nearly twenty editions during a seventy-five-year career” and several epigones\(^8\), Elyot’s *regimen* determined a great number of popular beliefs in medicine and foods for more than two centuries\(^9\).

1. *A humanistic plan for the terrible Tudor*

   Playing a diplomatic role and being called Thomas were not exactly guarantees of a long life, at the court of Henry VIII (1491-1547). Nonetheless, Thomas Elyot got through the downfall of his friend, Thomas More, and of his patrons, Thomas Wolsey and, later, Thomas Cromwell\(^10\). But he never attained their same height of responsibility: Among his different minor offices, including clerk in the Royal Council, sheriff, justice of the

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\(^7\) The date of the *princeps* is argued on the ground of one Elyot’s letter with no year date. Pearl Hogrefe, *The Life and Times of Sir Thomas Elyot*, Ames, Iowa State University, 1967, pp. 241-244. Based on the same letter, previous biographers had stated year 1534 (for instance Samuel A. Tannebaum, “Introduction” to *The Castel of Helth* (*1541*), Scholars’ Facsimiles & Reprints, New York, 1937).

\(^8\) S. A. Tannenbaum, “Introduction”, op. cit., p. iii.


\(^10\) Thomas Cranmer’s downfall happened later (1553-1556) at the hand of Mary I.
peace, and member of Parliament, his most prestigious appointment was in the embassy to Emperor Charles V in the winter of 1531-32. But it lasted only few months and never happened again. Conversely, Elyot’s literary career, once activated inside the courtly circle, never faded. He had been fed at the humanistic “school” of More, studied closely the works of continental masters like Erasmus and Vives (though we cannot tell if he met them) and the Italian Neo-Platonists, together with a number of Greek primary sources that had been recently translated into Latin, Plato among them. Scholars agree in stating that Elyot developed neither a philosophical nor an artistic flair from the acquisition of European Humanisms, but he merged this version of humanism into his peculiar courtier-like attitude and shaped from it a wider humanistic educational program for the Kingdom of England.

The Castel of Helth is, chronologically, the last of a ponderous triptych ushered in 1531, as Elyot

11 Elyot should uphold Henry’s choice to divorce Catherine of Aragon, the Emperor’s aunt, and scholars guessed that he lacked in zeal, since, inwardly, he was a faithful catholic and sided with the queen. See P. Hogrefe, *Thomas Elyot*, op. cit., pp. 157-180.


14 One of the sources, models and authors which Elyot is often compared with, is Castiglione, starting from P. Hogrefe’s article “Elyot and The Boke Called Cortigiano in Ytalion”, in *Modern Philology*, vol. 27, N. 3 (Feb. 1930), pp. 303-309. See Teresa Kennedy, *Elyot, Castiglione and the Problem of Style*, New York, Peter Lang, 1996.
published *The Boke Named the Governour*\(^\text{15}\). The latter belongs to the literary category of the “prince’s mirrors,” and was inspired from Plato’s *Republic* and aimed to educate and edify the ruling class. If Elyot held Erasmus as a model of formal instruction\(^\text{16}\), he did not follow him, instead, in the Christian emphasis of the *Institutio principi Christiani*, confronted his princes and gentlemen with a less ideal reality, where rulers also dealt with taxes, marriages, alliances, and wars\(^\text{17}\). The *Governour* presents for the first time in English, according to Major, two of the great commonplaces of the Renaissance thought, the idea of the world order and the organic analogy between a good republic and a healthy body\(^\text{18}\): “A publyke weale is a body lyvyinge”, explains Elyot in the Introduction to Book I.

A further care of Sir Elyot concerned the literary status and makings of vernacular English. According to Stein, “Elyot’s endeavor to make the ideas, culture, and wisdom of classical antiquity available to his countrymen in the vernacular involved translating from Greek and Latin into English\(^\text{19}\).” But the English language was quite new in being used in this way as it still lacked necessary words. In *Castel*, while writing a list of digestives and purges drawn from the Greeks authors, Sir Elyot observed:

\(^{15}\) *The Boke named the Governour devised by Sir Thomas Elyot knight*, London, Thomas Berthelet, 1531.

\(^{16}\) He drew especially from *De ratione studii* and *De pueris instituendis* (cfr. J. M. Major, *Sir Thomas Elyot*, op. cit., pp. 80-81).

\(^{17}\) Ibid. Major identifies Italian humanists as further sources for the *Governour*: Francesco Patrizi, Matteo Palmieri, Giovanni Pontano, Enea Silvio Piccolomini, Machiavelli; one more time Baldassar Castiglione.

\(^{18}\) J. M. Major, *Sir Thomas Elyot*, op. cit., p. 179.

I have not writen all, for as moche as there be dyvers thynges, whereunto we have not yet founden any names in englishe. 

So, he tried to fix this deficiency in *The Dictionary of Thomas Elyot Knight* (1538), a Latin-English lexicon based on classical literature and the philological method of humanists. Stein explained, “The educational ambition of Elyot’s receptive Latin-English dictionary was [...] the creation of a reference tool to enable his countrymen to understand the meanings of thousands of Latin lexical items and make his readers familiar with the world of the ancient Greeks and Romans.” The English’s reception of humanism and classical culture, in Elyot’s opinion, could and should pass through divulgation in the vernacular texts that included ancient medical wisdom.

Undergone two to three editions among 1534 and 1541, and thus preexisting the Dictionary, *The Castel of Helth* reiterated the topics of the public weal and the necessity of improvement in vernacular communication, both tided to the needfulness to popularize preventive medicine and the related practices, and therefore to contribute to collective morality, which would be more easily achieved through a temperate and healthy body. While *The Governour* and the Dictionary had been dedicated to Henry VIII, the 1539 *princeps* was addressed to Thomas Cromwell, who was, at that time, Elyot’s

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20 When not differently said, I quote from *The Castel of Helth corrected and in some places augmented by the fyurste author thereof, syr Thomas Elyot knight, the yere of oure lord 1541*, here c. 57v.
22 Scholars differ in assigning the *princeps*’ year, but they all agree in stating that the print of 1539 kept in the British Library is a reprint of a first edition, so far unidentified.
23 Henry VIII was particularly interested in the Dictionary and participated in its composing, sending books and writing comments and suggestions. See P. Hogrefe, *Sir Thomas Elyot*, op. cit., pp. 272-273.
patron. Not unexpectedly, after Cromwell’s disgrace and execution in 1540, Sir Elyot felt safer in turning one more dedication to his mercurial king and kept the opportunity to expand the preface, explaining the reasons that brought him to write the Castel, and to write it in English.

2. The implications of the vernacular choice

While in Basel Paracelsus’ attempt to defy the established authority of classic and medieval medicine\(^{24}\), the same authority had just been sturdily restated in the Kingdom of England – though not without elements of innovation. Thomas Linacre, the royal physician who endorsed the establishment of the first College of Medicine (1518)\(^ {25} \), was educated at the Italian universities\(^ {26} \), and thus brought Humanism back to London in the double form of personal knowledge and philological method. Linacre became a renowned translator of Greek


to Latin and, from 1517 to the mid-1520s, he translated directly Galen’s works from the original text, which texts were at the core of humoral and temperamental theories and that, hitherto, had reached European scholars only through Arabian versions27.

Linacre’s reputation was extraordinary in life and in death, and Elyot, in his second preface to the *Castel of Helth*, was supposed to acknowledge only Linacre as his master and mentor:

…before that I was XX yeres olde, *a worshipfull phisition, and one of the moste renoumed at that time in England*, per-ceyvyng me by nature inclined to knowledge, rad unto me the works o Galene o temperametes, natural faculties, the Introduction of Johannicius, with some of the Aphorismes of Hippocrates28.

Elyot also highly praised the influence of the medieval *Regimen sanitatis Salernitanum*, which in fact draws attention to the peculiar connection of the work with his country due to its dedication to an unspecified “King of England29.” The *Regimen Salerni* had been greatly popular in all of Europe since its appearance, and in 1528, the Augustinian friar Thomas Paynell

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27 He translated *De sanitate tuenda, Methodus medendi, De temperamentis, De naturalibus facultatibus, De symptomatum, De puulsum usu*.

28 *The Castel of Helth*, “Proheme”, s.n. (the preface’s charts have no numbers).

29 *The Regimen sanitatis salernitanum* is a didactic poem written in Latin exameters concerning diet, hygiene and healthy living according to the Greek and Arabic tradition taught at the School of Salern, dedicated to an unspecified “rex anglorum”. Who and when exactly composed is not certain, although it is traditionally supposed to be written in the 12th century by poet John of Milan.
translated it into English\textsuperscript{30}. That same year, the printer Robert Copland published the vernacular version of the Pseudo-Aristotle’s \textit{Secretum Secretorum}, which, although not as specifically “medical” as the \textit{Regimen}, was a further medieval fundamental source for healthful practices and behaviors\textsuperscript{31}. So one could say that this remark by Elyot was fully justified: “It semith, that phisike in this realme hathe ben well estemid\textsuperscript{32}.” Furthermore, one could even observe, perhaps, the idea that vernacular English was well esteemed, too. However, the recipients of those Latin works were still meant to be physicians, a privileged group of learned men who dealt with medicine chiefly in its theoretical and rarefied form, seldom visiting sick men and even more seldomly touching them, unless they belonged to the aristocracy\textsuperscript{33}. Physicians’ activities were generally confined to prescribing treatments on the basis of the description of symptoms the patients reported to them, while the great part of interventions was performed by barbers and surgeons, who were often unlearned\textsuperscript{34}. A fourth subject involved in the medical process was the apothecary, who also prepared medicaments upon patients’ request\textsuperscript{35}.

Nonetheless, to properly describe one’s own disease, one should at least be able to identify the

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\textsuperscript{30} \textit{Regimen sanitatis Salerni. This boke techyng al people to gourne them in helthe, is translated out of the Latyne tonge in to englishe by Thomas Paynell. Whiche boke is as profitable as nedefull to be had and redde as any can be to obserue corporall helthe}, London, Berthelet, 1528.
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\textsuperscript{31} A work perhaps closer to English experience, since philosopher Roger Bacon (c. 1219-1292) had edited a manuscript of the \textit{Secretum} with his own comments and glosses.
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\textsuperscript{32} \textit{The Castel of Helth}, op. cit., s.n.
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\textsuperscript{33} E. L. Furdell, “Henrician Doctors”, op. cit., p. 20.
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\textsuperscript{34} One of the goals of the Royal College should be to prevent the disordered and unqualified practice of the profession.
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symptoms and possess the vocabulary to describe them. Elyot, who felt the shortage of his mother tongue to be incapacitating in the relation with the philosophical and scientific contents that sprouted from the humanistic soil, understood that no authentic communication could exist between the world of “official” medicine and laymen, unless laymen could learn to comprehend and explain a part of that world. Thus, Elyot did not write for licensed doctors, but to educate “men and women,” as he put it, to the careful observation of their bodily temperament and reactions:

…requyringe all honest phisitions to remember, that the intent of my labour was, that men and women redinge this warke, and observinge the counsayles therin, shulde adapte therby their bodies […] infourmynge diligently the same phisitions, of the maner of their affectes, passions, and sensibile tokens36.

Even so, the 1541 preface suggests in several passages that physicians did oppose Elyot’s *regimen* (“I wote not why physitions should be angre at me”), that they deemed it an encroachment and disapproved of the use of the vernacular. Actually, physicians strenuously opposed vernacular medical writings until the end of the 17th century, as the English language had finally replaced Latin in almost every kind of exchange regarding culture and science: for the “licensed” doctors, the exclusivity and the safeguard of their class were at stake,

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36 *The Castel of Helth*, c. 94v. In the preface: “I wrate and dyd set fourth the Castel of helthe for their [physician’s] commodity, […] that by the true information of the sycke man, by me instructid, they mought be the more sure to prepare medicines convenient for the disseasis”.

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inasmuch as the use of Latin granted a limited access to the profession\textsuperscript{37}.

The defense of the Castel that Elyot upheld in the Proheme (and recalled in several in-text passages) moved up all the issues that, according to Brown, would have identified the forthcoming debate on the use of the vernacular for scientific literature: the sense of duty and public service toward the English population (“only for the fervent affectyon whiche I have ever borne toward the publike weale of my countray”); the example of the Ancients (“let theym remembre, that the grekes wrate in greke, the Romanes in latyne, Avicena, and other in Arabike, whiche were their owne propre and maternall tonges”); the worry to be “in a late” compared to other European countries, such as Italian states and France (“that we shall have lesse neede of thynges brought out of farre countrayes”); and a boost for the vernacular in general to act as a powerful ingredient toward Tudor nationalism. In addition to Elyot’s very lexicographic concern, the Castel displays in the “language question” his educational attitude, the will to provide, no doubt, practical and easy-to-use tools, but also to make clear their \textit{raison d’être}:

The one is callyd cruditie, the other lassitude, whyche althoughe they be wordes made of latyne, havynge none apte englyshe worde therefore, yet by defynytions and more ample declaration of them, they shall be understande suffycyentely, and from henseforthe used for englysh\textsuperscript{38}.


\textsuperscript{38} The Castel of Helth, op. cit., c. 74v.
Including in-text such subjects of topicality as the language question and the debates of and around physicians, Elyot connected the *Castel of Helth* to his contemporaneous reality in space and time; a goal that neither a Greek or Latin regimen nor their vernacular translations or synopsis could reach.

3. A regimen shaped for the English public

Beyond Elyot’s offering of the text in his maternal tongue, in the *Castel of Helth* he made connections to its audience by using a peculiar organization and format. So far it is the oldest known exemplar of those vernacular medical *regimina* that Jennifer Richards says to be the emblem of Renaissance “useful books”:

A genre of self-helping writing that appear to be almost entirely practical in its conception and concerns […] However, to assume that only application underpinned the composition and reception of these texts obscures a crucial dimension of their meaning. Vernacular regimens were also written to be read than simply to be used, and to be read in a thoughtful way.

For a book to be useful, first of all, it must be easy to consult. And the *Castel* was easy to consult because Elyot provided, for one example, an alphabetical index of the subject right after the preface, and he even explained how to use it, which seems to indicate that the

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40 A previous similar index is to be found in the 1528 translation of the *Regimen Salerni*, which also disposed the Villanova’s commentary in alphabetical order, according to subject.
prospective reader might be not confident with the book as an object:

It muste be remembred, that the number in the Table, dothe signify the leaf, and the letter A, doth sygnifie the first page or syde, the letter B, the seconde page or syde\textsuperscript{41}.

The actual treatise, then, is made up of a schematic, but one graphically refined. It is composed of four books, each one divided into chapters that are clearly identified by titles and decorated with small drop caps (while each book’s incipit has a bigger, historiated drop cap). When the need arises to enumerate elements, Elyot gives well organized lists and graphically restates the prose’s information that usually introduced them, grouping the elements in curly brackets according to their common quality or belonging\textsuperscript{42}. He often equips the explanation with the classic references in form of \textit{marginalia}, probably to assure the learned public and physicians about his own reliability as a medical author.

\textit{Book I} introduces the principles of Galenic medicine, always with the help of graphics and brackets: things natural, non-natural, and against nature; the theory of humors and temperaments; and some rudiments of the anatomy, grouped into “principal” (“from which all the Parts of an organical Body are said to be framed”\textsuperscript{43}, i.e. brain, heart, liver, and genitalia), “official” (parts that are ancillary to the principal members, like sinews

\textsuperscript{41} \textit{The Castel of Helth}, op. cit., s.n.
\textsuperscript{42} This layout was kept at least until the last recorded print in 1610.
\textsuperscript{43} E. R. Gent, \textit{The experienc’d Farrier or Farring Completed. Containing every thing that belongs to a Compleat Horseman, Groom, Farrier or Horseleach}, London, 1720, p. 82. The Galenic theories were transferred to the letter on veterinary treatise.
and arteries), “similar” (members that “beynge devyded remain in them self like as they were”) and “instrumental” (the organs that transform food). Among the last, Elyot devotes much attention to the stomach, since it presides as the only function on which man can exert a form of direct control: nutrition. The control of nutrition amounts to a discipline of self-education aimed at restoring the balance of humors, and therefore improves individual and collective well-being.

As it could act on the bodily humors whose unbalance, according to Galenic theories, causes sickness, nutrition is the core of preventive medicine, and Book II deals with food and drink: their effects on human complexion, parts of the body or state of mind, suggestions about methods, quantity and order of their consumption, and recipes for simple remedies such as digestives or purges.

Sir Elyot quotes many passages from his classic guides, giving the references in the marginalia, including Galen, Iohannicius, Aetius, Oribasius, Celsus, etc., and sometimes repeating locis that could be of little help to his fellow readers, such as the virtues of camel’s milk. But in as many passages, he tailors the

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45 Foods, as every natural element present in the world, were believed to be a compound of the four fundamental elements (air, water, earth and fire) and thus participated of their four temperaments, each food developing its own complexion. This complexion acted on the body according to the principle of imitation or opposition, which was at the ground of every ancient “natural magic”.

46 Digressions on the qualities of camel’s milk were present in the Regimen Salerni and Secretum secretorum as well.
communication to the readers’ world. This happens when he talks about the peculiarities of the English people’s habits and food. For example:

Wherfore of men, which use moch labor or exercise, also of them, which have very colerike stomakes here in Englanede, grosse meates may be eaten in a greate quantitie: and in a chol-erike stomake biefe is better dygested than a chykens legge, forasmoche as in a hotte stomacke fyne meates be shortly aduste and corrupted.⁴⁷

In passages like this, Elyot connects a local diet based on beef (elsewhere he specified: “English bief”), mutton and ale, that Greek and Arabian doctors did not debate, to the peculiarities of the environment and lifestyle. Nor did he forget to exemplify typical local diseases:

For as moche as at the present tyme in this realme of England, there is not any one more annoyaunce to the helth of mans body, than distillacions from the head called rhewmes.⁴⁸

Furthermore, Elyot personalized the regimen every time he testified of his own experience. Regarding rhinitis, for example, he writes:

I my selfe was by the space of foure yeres continually in this discrasie, and was counsayled by dyvers phisitions, to kepe my hed warme, and to use Diatrion piperion, and such other hot things as I have rehersed, at the last felynge myselfe very feeble, and lackinge appetite and slepe, as I happened to read Galene […] I perceyved that I had ben longe in an errour.⁴⁹

After that, a detailed description of a diet and natural, herbal remedies follows, along with unveiled accusations toward English physician’s shortsightedness.

⁴⁷ The Castel of Helth, op. cit., c. 16r. e v.
⁴⁸ The Castel of Helth, op. cit., c. 77v.
⁴⁹ The Castel of Helth, op. cit., c. 79r.
In this way, the *Castel of Helth* appears as a regimen that is shaped in part by contemporary and local needs, and which is also closer to its audience, whom the author addresses firsthand, reporting his personal, private experiences – experiences that encourage imitation and reasoning. Because of this, we can share Richards’ conclusion on Renaissance “useful books”:

> In the end these books are useful not just because they contain information that can be applied but also because they lead readers to engage critically with the medical advice they are given.\(^{50}\)

### 4. The moral framework of the Castel of Helth

As every worthwhile regimen, *The Castel of Helth* includes prescriptions not only about foods and drinks but also about hygiene, physical exercise, sleep, and many other daily life behaviors. All these habits share with dietary recipes the common denominator of “diligent temperance” and “moderation” – moderation in every aspect: quality and quantity of foods, temperature in cooking, time spent in sleep (or watch), physical efforts and sexual intercourse, assumptions of medications, the use of bloodletting and purges, etc. Moderation is even recommended for fasting and other abstinence-based practices.\(^{51}\)

Among foods, moderation in drinking wine and ale is solicited several times, exceptionally through Elyot’s

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\(^{50}\) J. Richards, «Useful Books», op. cit., p. 250.

\(^{51}\) The virtue of “moderation in fasting” was later restated from a less “medical” regimen which had, possibly, an even stronger moral aim, being written by a Jesuit priest. Leonardus Lessius’ *Hygiasticon* (1614), though Catholic, was translated in English and then reprinted until the mid 18th century.
quoting the highest pagan and religious authorities, Plato and the Bible\textsuperscript{52}. This particular fact deserves a remark, since the religious element, in the \textit{Castel}, is seldom related to food, medicine and further “technical” information\textsuperscript{53}, while it emerges in mere moral passages (like the one devoted by Elyot to the horrible vice of ingratitude) with the most typical motive of the reformed Christianism: “the incomparable benefit, which we have received by Christ’s passion”\textsuperscript{54}.

Yet the recurrent topic of moderation has a strong moral significance. In the intellectual culture of the Renaissance, temperance and sobriety belonged to the semantic field of \textit{aurea mediocritas}, which was retrieved from the classics and reworked by the humanists, notably the Neoplatonists\textsuperscript{55}. So important was the concept of moderation for Elyot that he had put it in the foreground of his first release of the Preface, the 1539 dedication to Cromwell:

\begin{quote}
He that lyveth moderately, dothe love alwaye faithfully: for over him affections and passions have left authoritie: and he that standeth iuste in the myddell, standeth most surely [...] The moderate personne, where bothe authoritie and virtue be in his frende equall, bycause that vertue was the onely cause
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{52} \textit{The Castel of Helth}, op. cit., c. 16v. and 32r.

\textsuperscript{53} On the contrary, this recurs more often in Italian \textit{regimina} of the 16\textsuperscript{th} century, both Latin and vernacular, in the form of anecdote or \textit{excusatio}. Tommaso Giannotto Rangoni stuffed his \textit{De vita hominis ultra CXX annos protrahenda} (ante 1550) with quotations from the Bible; Alvise Corner, in his well-known \textit{Discorsi de la vita sobria} (1558), linked the dietary misbehaviors to Lutheranism.

\textsuperscript{54} \textit{The Castel of Helth}, op. cit., c. 64v.

\textsuperscript{55} English Neoplatonism had different roots from continental one, as “all medieval thought up to the twelfth century was Neoplatonic rather than Aristotelian”. Cfr. Sears Jayne, “Ficino and the Platonism of English Renaissance”, in \textit{Comparative Literature}, Vol. 4, No. 3 (Summer 1952), p. 215 e sgg.
of his love, that remaynynge, his wynde is in suche wyse thereunto joined, that although authoritie happen to flyp, yet that love of vertue maye never be severed.

Moderation, which was in itself a virtue, was also an affordable means to reach the virtue in its pure, absolute meaning, which Sir Elyot platonically identified as knowledge. But from a passage of Book II, we are allowed to suppose that, according to Elyot, moderation was not a virtue for everybody.

Among several dietary habits, in Chapter 28 the author harshly blamed gluttony, which at the time did not refer to quantity, but to quality – an immoderate desire to eat and to combine many different foods together, which was believed to damage the body as well as the domestic economy as such would involve cost. It would have been enough to have laws against lavishness, Elyot complained, except that there was never a real will to issue them:

56 The Castel of Helth ed. 1539, “Preface”, s.n.
57 H. H. Major, Sir Thomas Elyot, op. cit., pp. 244 ff. referring to Elyot’s dialogue Knowledge which maketh a wise man.
58 The Castel of Helth, op. cit., cc. 42-43, “Of diversitie of meates”, cc. 42-43. Having each aliment its own complexion, the stomach could not properly receive and process contemporarily all of them.
59 During Henry VIII’s reign at least two groups of sumptuary regulations were issued, in 1515 and 1542, “which regulated minutely the number and composition of dishes suitable for a number of important persons “spiritual and temporal”. But those important persons were clearly reluctant to observed them, at that point that even the diet of bishop Thomas Cranmer as a prisoner included more foods than laws allowed, either as for quantity or qualities. See Carl I. Hammer, A “Healthy Diet? The Prison Diets of Cranmer and Latimer”, in The Sixteenth Century Journal, Vol. 30, No. 3 (Autumn 1999), pp. 664 ff.
For the nobilitie was exempted and had lybertie to abide styl in the dungeon, if they wold, and to lyve lasse while than other men. 

After having advocated temperance and sobriety throughout his “prince’s mirror,” in the Castel Elyot suggests that neither the urgency of nor the attitude toward moderation concerned the noblemen, who even had the liberty to choose to live shorter lives than other men in consideration of their excesses. Perhaps he meant to be sarcastic, but it is easy to suppose, as a consequence, that non-aristocratic and less wealthy people were seen more closely, and that they were more inclined to the virtue of temperance, first of all for necessity, as they could afford neither lavishness nor physicians. And, unavoidably, one could even think that the idea of the golden middle worked together with the middle-class perspective – an association that grew so quickly that Daniel Defoe, at the beginning of the 18th century, had already taken the liberty of mocking it. Hereafter, Elyot could have hidden a further sign of disappointment toward the ruling class:

Alas how longe wyll men fantasy lawes and good ordynaunces, and never determyne them. Fantasy procedeth of wytte, determination of wisedome, witte is in the devising of spekynge, but wisdom is in the performance, which resteth only in execution.

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60 The Castel of Helt, op. cit., c. 43r.
61 In the Book III, Chapters XVII-XXII deal with abstinence, continence, temperance and sobriety, even in diet.
62 Robinson Crusoe’s father composes a long eulogy on the attitude of “middle station” - i.e. middle class - to moderation and temperance, but he suffers from gout (Chapter I).
63 The Castel of Helth, op. cit., 43v.
Notwithstanding the efforts of humanists and all the princes’ mirrors, the members of the ruling class were not yet able to master the supreme virtue, since their knowledge did not correspond to their actions: they were able to fantasize, but not, for instance, to issue laws to protect their own health and money; and they were able to conceive of idealistic (utopian?) realities, but not to set a legislation to prevent tyrannical drifts and safeguard the servants of the *res publica*. Gluttony, a sin of rich people, was the entrance *par excellence* to disorder and unlawfulness, as senses had the power to corrupt one’s will through affection and desire\(^6\), and taste, as it is connected to the primary stirrings of hunger, was maybe the most compelling, and therefore dangerous.

The “men and women” who appear to have been the ideal recipients of *The Castel of Helth* had no power over anything nor anyone but themselves. Neither did they have any physician or counsellors who cared about their physical and mental wellness. But they belonged to the body of the State, and, as a part of it, being healthy was their duty (more than their right). Following a diet, along with a series of further hygienical habits, trained the readers’ discipline of the body, keeping them healthy and preventing their reason, as far as possible, to be overcome by senses, and virtues by sins. The process of learning to plan and following new behaviors crossing a book’s content with one’s own experience was itself, perhaps, an exercise of self-education.

At the same time, the use of the vernacular, which helped Elyot to reach this “popular” audience, could be attractive even for a more educated public. After all, it proved that the English language had become, or was to become, apt to deal with subjects that, until then, people

were used to discussing in Latin. And differently from those of Latin, English regimen not only conveyed ancien, ideal (and continental) models – be they classic or Christian – but also, it complied with local customs and husbandry, with local culture. It was a point of national pride, and it could grant Elyot’s exhortations to temperance and reasoning one more chance to conquer that ruling class that seemed so reluctant to give up its leanings to excesses and tyrannical methods, which were so dangerous for the public weal.

As I mentioned earlier, *The Castel of Helth* was reprinted many times in the following 70 years. EEBO’s archives\(^6\) make available 11 different reprints of the 1541 version, seven of which came out during Queen Elizabeth’s reign\(^6\). And in fact, the last *Castel* is dated 1610, which was during the reign of King James I. There was an outbreak of bubonic plague that year, but other editions had appeared during epidemics, as happened in 1544 and in 1587. This last production was a success, and it had epigones, the most illustrious of which was probably the physician Andrew Boorde (ca. 1490-1549). His *Compendious regimente or dyetary of health* (1542), whose preface claimed, not by chance, the medical profession of the author, officially started from Galen as well, and emphasized even much more the national characteristic alimentary habits. In fact, so well received by the medical writers was the national motion, that sometimes it became part of the works’ titles. Timothy Bright, author of the *Treatise of Melancholy*, in 1580 published *The Sufficiency of English Medicine*, and a later version of the *Regimen salerni*

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\(^6\) Early English Books Online virtually contains every English book, and every book printed in the Kingdom’s territories and dependencies, from 1473 to 1700.

\(^6\) In 1560, 1561, 1572, 1576, 1580, 1587, 1595.
(1608) was entitled *The Englishman’s Doctor*. Although Galenic knowledge would inform the medical practice of the Kingdom for more than a century to come, its literary representation should possibly comply with the domestic cultural leadership, which, in the course of the Elizabethan age, had gradually been emancipated by the influence of Italian humanism.

References


