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Flying Ointments in Medieval Medicine? Henbane in Old English Medical Texts

Abstract: Henbane is one of approximately nine hundred herbs and plants prescribed in the Old English (henceforth OE) medical texts. Depending on the dosage, some of these herbs have severe intoxicating effects, high dosages can be fatal. Henbane is a rather dangerous drug, as it contains narcotic tropane alkaloids with notable pharmacological properties. It has been known and employed both as a pain killer and a hallucinogenic drug throughout history. Henbane is prescribed in several passages of the OE medical collections, namely in *Bald's Leechbook*, *Leechbook III* the *Lacnunga* and the OE *Herbarium*, however, indications on dosage are never provided. The use of henbane in European history, as well as the effects and usages of other potentially toxic plants administered in OE medicine, have already been given scholarly attention, but the role and curative aspects of henbane in OE medicine have never been taken into consideration so far. This paper aims at filling this scholarly gap by focusing on the use of henbane in the OE medical texts. Possible effects on the patient will also be discussed.

Key terms: Old English, henbane, beolone, hænebelle, symphoniaca, medicine, history, English, Leechbook, Lacnunga