

Leprosy and Social Class in the Middle Ages

TO THE EDITOR:

Dr. Ell painted a vivid picture of leprosy in the Middle Ages [Int. J. Lepr. 54:300–305, 1986], but he weakened his editorial by the statement that “autoamputation of the digits . . . facial coarsening and vocal changes occur in no other disease.”

Autoamputation of the digits, as is well known, never occurs in leprosy; what does occur is shortening of the fingers from absorption of the phalanges. Facial coarsening is characteristic of myxedema and of lipoid proteinosis, as well. Vocal change—hoarseness—does occur with great regularity in leprosy, but it is also a constant feature of myxedema and of advanced tuberculosis. The former was probably commoner than leprosy even in its epidemic heyday. Congenital syphilis probably destroyed nearly as many noses as leprosy did, and the difference in appearance is a subtle one. This, of course, would have happened only in the 16th century and afterward.

Wertlich (for *weltlich* = worldly) may have been a typographical error not readily caught by a monolingual proofreader. “Depradations” (for depredations) seems like a misspelling (I spelled “irrelevance” irrelevance until I was almost 40!). [The JOURNAL takes responsibility for this error and apologizes to Dr. Ell and Dr. Arnold, and to all its readers.—RCH]

Notwithstanding my irresistible urge to pilpulism, I enjoyed the editorial and was informed by it.

Parenthetically, “shedding the disgusting macules of leprosy” sounds much more like shedding the disgusting scales of psoriasis. What would a leprosy patient be able to “shed”? Fingers?

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