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'I Haue Ben Crised and Besy': Illness and Resilience in the Fifteenth-Century Stonor Letters

Deborah Thorpe

Centre for Chronic Diseases and Disorders, University of York

Abstract

The modern and medieval meanings of words reporting ill health often bear little resemblance to one another. This article compares the use of 'diseased' and 'sick' in the fifteenth-century Stonor family letters. It examines the word 'crased', which implies physical ill health most directly, but also suggests emotional, psychological, or spiritual distress in female family members especially. The article then turns to the practical implications of poor health, asking how and why it affected the day-to-day concerns of the Stonors and their associates. It uncovers compelling evidence for resilience in the face of many and competing calls of duty. Finally, the article presents unique palaeographical evidence for the impact of illness, where a correspondent is so 'seke' that he can scarcely hold his pen.

Keywords

palaeography; history; medical humanities; Stonor family; letter writing; fifteenth century; disease; mental health; history of emotions

Introduction

According to the *ars dictaminis*, the opening lines of late medieval letters in English should parade a series of standardized phrases that includes an enquiry after the recipient's health and a report of the sender's wellbeing.¹ However, the fifteenth-century letters from, to, and between members of the Stonor Family of Oxfordshire often neglect part of the formula. Loosening the tight constraints of formal letter writing, these pragmatic letters open with the form of address and commendation to the reader, e.g. 'Wurschepful m\ a\ ister I reccomend me vnto *your* gud maisterchep', before moving into the body of the letter.² These correspondents write with the assumption that, unless specified otherwise, the writer is experiencing equilibrium of health and wishes equal stability upon the addressee.

Despite the silence about wellbeing in the salutations, there are a number of references to health elsewhere in the letters. This article examines the nature of these intimations of health – poor health especially – in the Stonor letters. It compares the Middle English words 'disease' and 'sickness' with their modern equivalents. There is an examination of the word 'crased' and its use in reference to women's health, exploring its connection between

(deborah.thorpe@york.ac.uk).

physical illness and psychological, emotional, and spiritual difficulties. Finally, the article turns to the practical impact of poor health, revealing the resilience of the sick as duty calls.

The Stonor Family and their Correspondence

The Stonors were an aspirational gentry family based at Stonor House, near Henley in Oxfordshire. Sir William Stonor (c.1449–1494), the family member about whom we learn the most from the Stonor letters, had a business partnership with Thomas Betson, a Calais wool merchant, lasting from 1475 to 1479.³ He was married three times, to Elizabeth in 1475, to Agnes in 1480, and finally to Anne in 1481. The first editor of the Stonor letters and papers, Charles Lethbridge Kingsford, estimated the collection to hold around 600 documents and since then an additional 152 have been located in London, Kew, The National Archives (TNA), with the majority held under SC 1/46.⁴ They accompany the Paston, Cely, Armburgh, and Plumpton Letters as a significant corpus of late medieval gentry correspondence. However, the majority of the surviving Stonor letters – which are fullest in the 1460s to 1480s – were sent to, rather than from, family members. As a result, the Stonors have received limited attention compared with the more famous Paston family.⁵

Despite this deficit, the Stonor letters shed light on the creation and maintenance of social bonds for the fifteenth-century gentry. For example, they bear witness to the financial negotiations that accompanied a marital union.⁶ However, the affectionate letters between Elizabeth and William Stonor remind us that medieval marriages of convenience need not be regarded as separate from affective unions; love could be ‘born from the womb of worldly goods’.⁷ Thomas Betson’s letters to the twelve or thirteen-year-old daughter of Elizabeth Stonor, whom he eventually married, have attracted especial attention from social historians. Charles Kingsford and Eileen Power call the letters ‘charming’, whilst later commentators are more doubtful of his character. Alison Hanham argues that, ‘even Eileen Power’s hero Thomas Betson may strike one, on critical acquaintance, as a glib, insinuating and often malicious young man’.⁸

The Stonor letters contribute to our understanding of late-medieval literacy, though the evidence has been interpreted with varying success. Kingsford uses the corpus as proof that ‘generally the country squires of Oxfordshire and their womenfolk, and the better class merchants of London could write with ease’.⁹ In fact, as Alison Truelove points out, close examination of the letters shows that Jane Stonor used secretaries and Elizabeth Stonor’s writing abilities were limited.¹⁰

The letters record attitudes towards autograph writing in the fifteenth century. They demonstrate that the use of a scribe was common and was not a reason to doubt the authenticity of a letter. However, Elizabeth Stonor appended letters with autograph postscripts, which were executed with effort.¹¹ These postscripts were appropriate channels for the most personal news. The existence of autograph letters by the Stonors’ kinswoman Margery Hampden shows that women could be confident in their writing ability.¹² Therefore, the Stonor letters witness the value of being able to write for late medieval people, including women.¹³

As Truelove notes, linguistic historians have found the Stonor letters rich in material for the study of the development of Middle English.¹⁴ The letters have provided grist for the mill in debates about standardization and the fifteenth-century English language, with Truelove indicating that the Stonor family exhibited more linguistic variation than their London-based correspondents, but that ‘uniformity in orthography, morphology or syntax was not attained in any of the letters’, even those written by Londoners.¹⁵

The Stonor letters shed light on many aspects of medieval family relations, legal activities, business operations, and political manoeuvring. They also contain evidence for the late-medieval experience of good and ill health, as this article demonstrates.

Kingsford’s transcriptions of the Stonor correspondence are unreliable. In some places there are sentences that bear no resemblance to the primary source.¹⁶ A re-publication in 1996, edited by Christine Carpenter, not only replicated these mistakes but generated yet more inaccuracies.¹⁷ Hanham also raises minor concerns with certain of Truelove’s subsequent transcriptions.¹⁸ It is for this reason that I return to the originals in TNA, whilst also providing Kingsford’s letter numbers. The majority of the Stonor letters were undated and Hanham doubts the accuracy of Kingsford’s chronology.¹⁹ More work is required on these dates, but in the absence of this I refer to Kingsford’s dates with caution.

‘Diseased’ and ‘Seke’: Definitions of Disorder

The medieval Latin terminology for ill health, *infirmi*, *aegri* and *egroti*, present the historian with some ambiguity, since the words are often used interchangeably for what we describe today as ‘diseased’, ‘sick’ and ‘impaired’.²⁰ Middle English, too, can cause confusion. The *Middle English Dictionary* (*MED*) provides an expansive definition of ‘disease’, covering both ‘bodily discomfort, suffering, or pain’ and ‘bodily infirmity or disability, sickness, illness, disease’.²¹ In addition to these medical meanings, the entry includes the more general affliction of ‘material discomfort or inconvenience’ and also psychological annoyance or distress. This indistinctness may be due to a flexibility within the medieval English words relating to health. Juhani Norri argues that medieval English does not witness the distinction between ‘disease’, ‘symptom’, and ‘sign’ that we make today.²² Nancy Siraisi finds that the name of a disorder is used for what would now be considered a set of symptoms, rather than an underlying invasive entity.²³ Norri proposes that the modern distinction between the ‘disease’ (a interruption of the normal structure or function of a part, organ or system of the body) and its symptoms is only vaguely made, if at all, in Middle English.²⁴

Despite the flexibility of the Middle English word ‘disease’, it was not used synonymously with ‘sick’ in the corpus of Stonor letters. In correspondence to William Stonor, Robert More writes that John Mathew is ‘deessyd or sek’ (SC 1/46/104, letter 188). It is possible that More’s juxtaposition of the two words around the conjunction echoes the abatement of near-synonyms in medieval legalese. The language of law presents lexical doublets, often between two words of different linguistic origin, to cover subtle nuances and avoid ambiguity.²⁵ Indeed, the word ‘disease’ originates from the Old French ‘desaise’, whereas ‘sickness’ comes from the Old English ‘s ocnes, s ocnes’.²⁶ However, further evidence

suggests that this is more than rhetorical pleonasm. John Yaxlee, writing to Stonor in 1481, reports that Mistress Harlston is worried because she has not heard from him for many days. She is concerned, 'lest ȝe had ben sore seke or gretly diseased' (SC 1/46/223, letter 292). The care that Yaxlee takes to embellish the words with the adjectives 'sore' and 'gretly' indicates that he apposes them as alternative conditions, rather than stylishly juxtaposed near-synonyms.

In the Stonor letters, 'disease' usually signifies pain or discomfort, literally a 'lack of ease' – the *MED*'s third definition of the word. This 'dis-ease' ranges from mild discomfort to severe pain. For instance, John Hurlegh writes to Thomas Stonor, 'I haue be sore diseised in my bakke and elles I shuld haue spoke with ȝow er þis' (SC 1/44/44, letter 44). Hurlegh uses 'disease' to communicate his pain and its practical impact. Similarly, when Hugh Unton writes to William Stonor in 1479, the comment 'I am a litill diseset for to ride' indicates his discomposure (SC 1/46/217, letter 253). However, like Hurlegh, his priority is to explain his absence: 'I beseche you hold me excuset that I come not vnto your maistership'. It is not necessary to specify the cause of his discomfort, only that its symptoms prevent his riding and delay the tasks at hand. Thus, when Thomas Hampton writes that has been 'at dyuerse tymys vysite *with* grete sykenesse to hym grete hevynesse and discomforte', the word 'discomforte' could be replaced with 'disease' and the meaning preserved (SC 8/342/16150, letter 344).

In contrast with this symptomatic definition of 'disease', 'sick' usually points to a combination of pathology and symptoms. Some writers provide explanatory detail, probably owing to the striking nature of the symptoms. For example, William Abel, perhaps having suffered a stroke, shows a 'palsey' – meaning a loss of motor control – which lends itself to special mention: 'William Abell is visited grete with sekenes and especially with a palsey whereof I am full sory' (SC 1/46/135, letter 295). However, the exact nature and symptoms of a 'sickness' is more usually left unqualified. For instance, after providing Thomas Stonor with an extensive list of the men who required quittance from Richard Fortescue, John Frende excuses himself for being sick and absent. He gives no details of his sickness except that it is grave: 'y am seke and ly styll yn my bed where y shall leve or day y wote nought' (SC 1/46/51, letter 71)

It is likely that Frende did not know the cause of his sickness. In a letter from the Cely letters corpus, William Cely is puzzled by the illness that killed his brother's daughter: 'Furdermore, plese hett yowre masterschypp to be enfforymyd that Margere ys dowghter ys past to Godd... Syr, I vnderstond hytt hadd a grett pang, what syckness hytt was I cannott saye, etc'.²⁷ Cely reports that the infant suffered a great 'pang' or spasm before her death, but the cause of her death remains a mystery.

The infant probably received care from within the family, through the kind of 'holistic medical program' that Elaine Whitaker finds in the Paston letters.²⁸ A university-educated London physician would have been visited only rarely, with most care being undertaken by family members or a local practitioner, apothecary, or herbalist.²⁹ Whitaker's study indicates that female family members implemented their own medical regimes.³⁰ They did call upon trusted leeches and apothecaries, but usually from their local area. In addition,

there is evidence in the Paston letters for a distrust of university-trained London-based practitioners. In one letter, Margaret Paston reveals that her confidence in physicians has been betrayed by past experience: 'be ware what medysynys ye take of any fysissyanys of London. I schal neuer trust to hem be-cause of yowre fadre *and* myn onkyl, whoys sowlys God assoyle'.³¹ The brevity of the letters' reports of illness may be due to this dependence on practical, local, experience over theoretical knowledge.

There are other potential reasons for this conciseness, stemming from the pragmatic nature of the Stonor correspondence. The writers evidently deemed it sufficient to know that an individual was sick and that this would affect their work. Explication beyond the matters at hand was unnecessary. This lack of explication means that the Stonor letters are streamlined, moving quickly from item to item. For example, a letter from Elizabeth to her husband contains a vague message about the ill health of Thomas Wode: 'Thomas a wode hys very sore syke at the Sworde in fflete strete' (SC 1/46/116, letter 170). In this case, the supplementary information was kept out of the body of the letter, deferred until Elizabeth's autograph postscript. She wrote this portion with her own hand, to reiterate the news about Wode and provide a little extra detail: 'ye schale vnder s[*l*]onde that Thomas Wode hys [...] the pokys'. This postscript was Elizabeth's opportunity to convey more personal messages, including extraneous medical detail about Wode's condition, the pox, which could refer to any of a series of diseases producing a rash of pimples, especially smallpox, cowpox, and chickenpox.³² If Elizabeth's letter, which Kingsford dates to 1475, refers to the 'great pox' or syphilis, there might be extra incentive to restrict this information to a private postscript. However, the origins of syphilis are still being debated, with Eugina Tognotti placing its first arrival in England at around 1497.³³ In addition, in another letter from Elizabeth, the word appears to refer to an airborne disease (SC 1/46/115, letter 169).

This sparseness in medical detail may also be due to assumed knowledge. For example, in letter 185, Thomas Betson writes to Elizabeth Stonor regarding her mother Margaret Croke. He reveals that he is having difficulty eliciting conversation from Margaret and wonders if this is attributable to a relapse of her 'old sickness': 'I spake vnto my lady *your* modyr on seynt Thomas daye, and she wold scarsely oppyn hir mouthe vnto me, she is displesid and I know nat wherefore, *with* owte hir olde sekenes be fallen on hir agayn' (SC 1/46/234, letter 185). Elizabeth clearly knows the nature of her mother's 'sickness', which is liable to make her irascible. Betson's trouble with Margaret appears more than once in the Stonor letters and is clearly a point of repeated discussion between him and Elizabeth (see letter 224). Therefore, he has no need to elaborate further in letter 185. He only hopes that God improves Margaret's mood: 'god send hir ones a mery contenance and a ffrendely tonge'.

Betson's description of Margaret's mood suggests her emotional instability, which is liable to interfere with her familial relationships. However, elsewhere, Betson's letters display irreverence, which may have been irritating even to those in the best of health. For instance, in a letter to his intended wife Katherine, he narrates a demand by his household that he stop writing and join them at dinner: 'come down, come down, to dener at ones' (SC 1/46/255, letter 166). Every other man is 'gone to his dener' and the clock has already struck noon, yet Betson sits writing defiantly until he is chastised. Alison Hanham calls Betson a 'mischief

maker', and it is possible that his disrespect has provoked Margaret's refusal to speak.³⁴ Elizabeth Stonor is certainly aware of both her mother's irritability and Betson's irreverence.

In contrast to this focus on Margaret's temper, there is little insight into male psychology in the letters. Descriptions of male symptoms relate to the body most explicitly (the back, the pox, the palsy, excessive sleeping, and pain in the hands). The aforementioned Thomas Betson is the subject of one of the few references to male mental health. Gravely sick, Betson experienced psychological distress as he slept: 'he felle into a grete slombering and was besily movid in his spiritus' (SC 1/46/142, letter 249).

The emotional disturbance caused by physical sickness is well attested in medieval correspondence. In a letter written after the death of Sir John Fastolf, his former servant John Bokkyng explains why he never confronted him about the financial losses that he made in his service. Bokkyng describes how he wished to broach the subject, but was afraid to because Fastolf was infamous for a sickness-induced temper. Fastolf's unsettled moods made him cruel, and he gave 'sharpe and bittre ansuers' to 'diuverse persones'.³⁵ This concern with emotional stability arose from the medieval preoccupation with will-making at the deathbed. Fluctuating emotions could affect the course of negotiations as a sick man died. Therefore, Fastolf's refusal to answer important questions rationally was of great concern to Bokkyng, who was consequently unable to resolve matters before his death. However, aside from this mention of Betson's unrestful sleep, which is a symptom of physical illness, the Stonor correspondence is quiet about male mental wellbeing.

This reticence about male psychological suffering contrasts with the word 'crased' in the corpus, which is used by Elizabeth Stonor at times of uncertainty. This female-oriented word associates with physical illness, busyness and possibly pregnancy in Elizabeth's letters to her husband. The word 'crased', uncommon in other corpora of letters but recurrent in Elizabeth's postscripts, warrants further investigation.

'Crased': Physiology and Emotions

In research presented at the Leeds International Medieval Congress in 2013, Philippa Maddern showed that medieval words that seem to describe emotions often correspond only uneasily with modern meanings ("Be mery [...] and eate your mete lyke a woman": Merriment, Health, and Salvation in Late Medieval English Texts', Leeds International Medieval Congress [IMC], 3rd July 2013). She gave an example in the Middle English use of 'passion', which appears to indicate strong feeling but more commonly referred to the suffering of Christ and his martyrs. It is tempting to relate the word 'crased', often used by female members of the Stonor family to excuse their remissness in writing, to the most modern definition: 'mentally impaired or deranged; insane'.³⁶ This temptation is partly owing to the evocative, and provocative, nature of this modern meaning. However, neither of the *MED*'s two definitions of the verb 'crasen' refer primarily to mental disturbance. Instead, the first means 'to shatter, crush, break to pieces' an object and the second 'to be diseased or deformed'. The former meaning is well attested in Middle English literature. In Chaucer's *The Book of the Dutchess*, the dreamer dreams that he awakes in a chamber with windows of un-'crased', or unbroken, stained glass: 'with glas | Were all the windowes well

yglased |..and nat an hole ycrased'.³⁷ It is likely that the *MED*'s latter definition has a metaphorical implications that originate from this physical meaning, indicating a 'broken' or 'cracked' body. This association of 'crased' with bodily complaints persists well into the seventeenth century. In 1632, William Lithgow, describing an unhappy night spent hiding in a cave from barbarous Cretans, makes a clear distinction between *mental* weakening ('fear') and *physical* deterioration, ('a crased body'). Lithgow lies, 'with a fearfull Heart, a crased Body, a thirsty Stomach, and a hungry Belly'.³⁸

This early modern evidence demonstrates that 'crased' was used in relation to men, as well as women. This is also the case in some medieval sources. For example, Robert Stillington, bishop of Bath and Wells, describes himself in prison at York as, 'sore crased by reason of his trouble and carying'.³⁹ In the Paston letters, too, John Paston II uses the word to describe a general deterioration of his health: 'I ame some-whatt crased, what wyt/h the see *and* what wythe thys dyet heere'.⁴⁰ However, in the Stonor family correspondence, the word is used almost exclusively by a woman, concerning women, in a way that connects physical illness with psychological unease.

In order to better understand these psychosomatic connections, we turn back to Philippa Maddern's investigation of the antithetical word, 'merry'. Maddern, in her comparison of the modern and Middle English meanings of the word, showed that the medieval 'merry' most commonly connoted soundness, wholeness, or healthiness, rather than light-hearted cheerfulness as it does today (Maddern, Leeds IMC, 2013). As 'merry' did not necessarily imply good cheer, one could be both bereaved and 'merry'. However, though the medieval 'merry' was not defined primarily in relation to mood as it is today, there was often an association between being in good health and experiencing pleasure and happiness. Maddern showed that being in high spirits could result from, and promote, good health. In addition, being 'merry' had connotations of spiritual wholeness. 'Crased', then, though it relates most directly to bodily infirmity, might also connote psychological unsoundness, emotional distress, or spiritual crisis. There is one use of the word by a male correspondent, Henry Dogett, who writes 'I am sumwhat crased, or els I wold haue seyn *your* maistershep' (SC 1/46/225, letter 143), but aside from this it is used exclusively by Elizabeth Stonor. The scarcity of male use of such terminology in this corpus is probably attributable to the eagerness of Stonor kinsmen to emphasise their resilience and to attribute their incapacity to a simple physical cause. The letters by men that survive are from individuals who are eager to demonstrate their practical value to William Stonor and underestimate the long-term implications of a bout of sickness. In Dogett's letter, he uses 'crased' as other male correspondents use the words 'diseased' or 'sick', to explain his absence from service. In contrast, Elizabeth Stonor, often separated from her husband, has reason to appeal to William's sensitivity to both her physical and emotional wellbeing in the face of difficult situations – and does so in the intimate autograph postscripts to her letters.

The use of the noun 'crasie' or 'crase' in Middle English testifies to this combination of physical and psychological meanings. The word refers to the humoralism that attributes temperamental excesses to imbalances of the four bodily humoral fluids of blood, phlegm, yellow, and black bile: '*crasie* (n.) Also *crase*: a combination of qualities or of humors; of persons: physiological condition, complexion, constitution; of air: state, condition'.⁴¹ If

‘merry’ encompasses both physical wellbeing and the pleasure of thriving, then it follows that ‘crased’ associates physical illness with the sorrow of being sick. Thus, ‘crased’ is an antonym of ‘merry’, indicating a disruption of psychological wellbeing that both results from, and engenders, poor physiological health.

In an autograph letter written in 1497, Margaret Beaufort uses the word ‘crased’, to report that the queen, Elizabeth of York, has been in poor health: ‘the quene hathe be a lytell crased but now she ys well god be thankyd’.⁴² Beaufort reassures the recipient, Thomas Butler, Earl of Ormand, that the queen; king Henry VII, and all of the children are now healthy. However, she expresses her concern that the queen is not as thoroughly recovered as she would like: ‘her syknes ys [not] soo good as y would but y truste hastyly yt shall, wth godd^s grasse’. Her statement gives no indication of the nature of the queen’s recent illness. Seeking an explanation, Anne Crawford glosses ‘crased’ as ‘delicate’, which implies a feeble constitution, weakness or liability to sickness.⁴³ In contrast, the definition of ‘crasen’ in the *MED* as ‘diseased or deformed’, has more serious potential connotations.

The Stonor letters contain evidence for these more serious connotations, suggesting that ‘crased’ covers both physiological and emotional ground. In 1477, Elizabeth Stonor closed a letter to her husband William with her autograph signature: ‘By youer ovne to my pouer Elysabeth Stonor’. Following a blank space, there is a short personal message, also in Elizabeth’s autograph hand: ‘My good cosen I am crased in my baket you \wott/ what I men’ (SC 1/46/120, letter 180). This statement, in which Elizabeth originally omits the word ‘wott’, appears at the foot of the page as if a spontaneous and intimate addition. The report may indicate pain in Elizabeth’s back and so would be comparable to one made by John Hurlagh to Thomas Stonor: ‘Also I haue be sore diseised in my bakke and elles I shuld haue spoke with 3 ow er pis’, which is a straightforward report of the physiological pain of back ache (SC 1/46/44, letter 44). However, there is some indication that Elizabeth’s complaint is not so simple.

Christine Carpenter, reflecting on the Middle English word ‘cresen’ (to become larger, increase), suggests that Elizabeth’s complaint is a euphemism for pregnancy: ‘[if ‘baket’ refers to Elizabeth’s back] this could either mean that she has a pain in the back or that she is increased i.e. grown larger in her back or in relation to a garment worn on the back i.e. that she is pregnant’.⁴⁴ She suggests that pregnancy explains the ‘rather coy rider’: ‘you wat \wott/ what I mean’. Truelove rejects the suggestion that ‘baket’ means ‘back’, proposing instead that it denotes ‘bucket’, a way of informing William of the early stages of pregnancy.⁴⁵ However, this use of the word is not recorded in the *MED*, and the most likely interpretation is that it is a diminutive of the word ‘back’, or the ‘small’ of the back.⁴⁶

Regardless of the implications of Elizabeth’s statement, her ‘coy rider’ seeks emotional commune with her husband. Unlike Hurlagh, whose comment relates to business matters at hand, Elizabeth’s statement hints at intimate marital knowledge. William’s understanding of her evasive words depends upon their past discussions regarding her pain, pregnancy, or both: ‘you wat \wott/ what I mean’. Her comment, presented without reference to pragmatic concerns, is intended as both an update and a complaint. Thus, the word ‘crased’ conveys more than simple bodily discomfort or enlargement. It communicates either the displeasure

of backache, or the uncertainty, excitement, and anticipation of an advancing pregnancy. Thus, though the definition of the word 'crased' relates primarily to a bodily condition, it may have further psychological implications. Indeed, if Elizabeth is sending news of a growing baby, there would have been eventual emotional distress. As Carpenter points out: 'there were no children by this marriage'.⁴⁷

In another letter to William, Elizabeth writes: 'I vndyrstond þat my douȝ ther Kateryn is craysed *and* hath a desese in hir neke. I mervell what it shuld be' (SC 1/46/114, letter 168). 'Crased' may refer to a specific disorder here, synonymous with the Middle English 'seke'. If so, the symptom is pain or discomfort, 'desese', to Katherine's neck. However, why did Elizabeth write 'crased', rather than 'seke', which she used in other letters (see 'sore seke of the poxes' SC 1/46/115, letter 169)? It is possible that she refers in part to the distress that this child experiences because of her mysterious pain. Indeed, Elizabeth herself expresses anxiety ('I mervell what it shuld be'), which is severe enough that she implores her husband to receive Katherine in London, presumably to gain access to a physician. Though the definition of the Middle English word 'marvel' ranges from 'surprise' and 'admiration' to 'puzzlement', in medieval correspondence it often expresses anxiety tinged with dismay: 'I marvele meche wat ys the cavse that ye send me no lett[er] from Caleys' (Cely letters).⁴⁸ In another letter from Elizabeth to her husband, she uses 'marvel' to express her exasperation as he fails to look after his health: 'I mervell that ye wold not send ffor noping to helpe you *after your* fallynge' (SC 1/46/210B, letter 208). The word 'marvel' in each of these examples indicates discomfort, intensified by a lack of control. Elizabeth writes 'my douȝ ther' because Katherine is her child only, born from the first of two previous marriages, which may intensify her sense of personal responsibility.

Elizabeth's unease about Katherine's impending treatment is understandable given the distrust of London-based physicians expressed by the Paston women at around the same time.⁴⁹ Her control over the situation is minimal, since she does not understand the cause of her daughter's pain and has to relinquish responsibility for her care. So, whether 'crased' is a gendered synonym for 'seke', or has additional emotional connotations, here it has a special feminine quality, which distinguishes it from either 'seke' or 'diseses'. The word relates to an unknown, and thus unspecified, physical disorder that would have resulted in psychological unrest in both mother and daughter.

In another letter to her husband, Elizabeth appends an autograph note to explain her remissness in writing. William is displeased with her laxness and Elizabeth excuses herself: 'And cosene ther as ye wryte to me þat I had no leysyr truly I haue ben crised *and* besy elys I wyld haue wryte to you or thys tym' (SC 1/46/119, letter 176). Elizabeth is physically unwell, according to the *MED*'s bodily definition of 'crased'. However, she is simultaneously busy and under pressure from her husband to deliver updates frequently. Her previous letter to William, written around a month before, confirms how busy she has been (SC 1/46/118, letter 175). In this letter Elizabeth is administrating deliveries of provisions to Stonor House whilst William is away. She is organising the transport of supplies to him in London and dealing with correspondence from her soon-to-be son-in-law, all whilst declining into ill health.

Elizabeth is compelled to call upon her intimacy with her husband in the final sentence of letter 176. The message partially illegible, but it clearly refers to their shared time in the bedchamber: 'My ovne good [hus]bond I se well ye remember þe pvttyng at...ovt off þe bed whan you *and* I lay last to gedyr (SC 1/46/118, letter 175). Elizabeth writes with thinner and lighter strokes here than she does elsewhere in the corpus (see, for a contrast, SC 1/46/119, letter 176). It might be speculated that this private message has been intentionally concealed, but the illegibility appears to arise from a combination of this lightness of hand and general manuscript damage. In this obscure message, Elizabeth alludes to shared memories whilst withholding the exact nature of the recollection, her reticence emphasising their marital intimacy. Whilst remote from her husband, she implores him to recall a moment of utmost closeness: their time together in the chamber. Elizabeth uses this appeal to encourage William's support at a time of difficulty. In the body of the letter, she, employs the word 'maruyll' again, to express her dismay as her brother-in-law compromises her reputation: 'I pray you grete wel my broder Thomas Ston[...] you to saye to heme that I maruyll gretly what[...] heme to say schoche langege by me as he dothe' (SC 1/46/118, letter 175). Elizabeth has to compete for credibility with her husband's brother, which causes her considerable distress. Considering this pressure, it is likely that 'crised' in letter 176 refers to emotional exhaustion coupled with physical ill health.

This combination of emotional pressure and ill health was a common experience for the Stonor correspondents. In a letter from Thomas Betson to Elizabeth Stonor, he confirms that he has heard of her husband's recent sickness (SC 1/46/236, letter 216). Betson has been told that this has caused anguish to Elizabeth and her household: 'I know well hathe nat bene to your hartes comfforte nor also to the comfforte off your howsold'. Though Betson expresses his sympathy ('ffor sothe I am right sory'), he asserts an expectation that she will lighten her mood. Betson has learned that William has recovered and thus instructs Elizabeth to set aside her distress without further delay. By being cheerful, Elizabeth can bring about vigour in her husband: 'neuertheles your ladyschipe muste cause hym to be mery *and* off glade chere'. In making this instruction, Betson alludes to the physiological meaning of 'merry' and, in its juxtaposition with 'glade chere', aligns it the implications of emotional wellbeing that Maddern identified. He tells her firmly that she should end her unfounded speculation and noxious worries: 'put a waye all ffantasyes *and* vnthryfty thoughtes'.

This confidence that 'good' emotions promote good health – both bodily and psychological – was expressed by the Greek physician of the first or second century AD, Soranus of Ephesus. Soranus insisted that unusual mental states could be exacerbated by tedium and sadness. He demonstrated that this is unsurprising given that 'healthy people in many instances incur bodily illnesses because of a troubled state of mind'. He stated that 'those who are not yet cured of a disease [may] suffer a relapse when their mental state has, so to speak, dealt a wound to their sickbed'.⁵⁰ Soranus's writings – which employed the metaphor of a physical wound to convey psychological sickness – stated an inextricable link between bodily illness and psychological wellbeing, which persisted in medieval medical thought.

Betson's pleas are likely also to be underpinned by beliefs about the healing powers of the soul. A belief in the bond between body and soul is reflected in the Anglo-Saxon texts

inspired by the cult of St Swithun, where the blind prior Byrhtferth demonstrates his lack of faith by seeking cauterisation for his blindness rather than relying, from the outset, on the healing power of God.⁵¹ Though medieval thought did not draw simplistic connections between sin and illness, it understood that physical illness could be exacerbated by a sickly soul.⁵² A declaration from the fourth Lateran Council of 1215 states, 'bodily infirmity is sometimes caused by sin'.⁵³ This recognition that sickness might be caused partially, if not completely, by sin is echoed in an anonymous plague tract from 1411: 'a corporal illness comes not only from a fault of the body but also from a spiritual failing'.⁵⁴ Medieval people clearly did not, in practice, rely on the healing power of faith alone. However, the cult of St Swithun demonstrates that the restoration of spiritual health was an essential first precaution in the treatment of the sick.⁵⁵ Thus, remedies for the body and soul were frequently employed in tandem in order to promote the greatest possible effect.⁵⁶ So, by shunning 'vnthryfty' thoughts – defined by the *MED* variously as 'evil', 'noxious', 'unwholesome' and 'unprofitable' – Elizabeth can aid the recovery both of William's soul and body. By doing this, Elizabeth will be following her own advice; she had earlier instructed her ailing husband to maintain a positive outlook for the sake of his health: 'I praye you...to be mery, and take n[o] conseytes *with* you in your [dis]ease [for] wyth [go]des *grace* it shall as lyghtly go as it come' (SC 1 46/210, letter 208).⁵⁷

Opposing the power of spiritual and emotional positivity is the damaging impact of negativity, when one does succumb to 'conseytes' or 'morbid ideas'.⁵⁸ Thus, Betson cautions Elizabeth about the dangers of unwholesome thoughts: 'that comes no good off but onely hurtfull' (SC 1/46/236, letter 216). If Elizabeth continues to exhibit uncontrolled behaviour, her husband may too become 'rytouse', or unbalanced and plunge back into sickness: 'A man may hurt hym selff by rytouse meanes it is good to be ware'. This letter demonstrates a commitment to the prompt abandonment of negative thoughts and distress relating to illness. For Betson, there was an inextricable link between emotional wellbeing, spiritual strength, and physical health.

This analysis has shown that the use of 'crased' did imply an interruption of physical health primarily. There are instances where the word reports a physical condition, in a similar way to 'seke'. In other places, its use may indicate pregnancy, overlapping with the word 'cresen', meaning 'increased in size'. However, as with 'merry', the word extends into the space between poor physical health and psychological instability, especially emotional distress and displeasure. The connection of the word 'crased' to women's health and its use at times of worry, busyness, or uncertainty, reinforces this link between body and mind. In 1561, when Queen Elizabeth I wrote to Mary Queen of Scots, she invoked the *MED*'s first definition of the word 'crasen': 'to shatter, crush, break to pieces'. Elizabeth calls upon Mary to ratify the Treaty of Edinburgh. She warns that when treaties are debated by conferences of ambassadors, the subjects of each party worry that the amity is, 'not sownde, but in some points shaken or crased'.⁵⁹ This use of the word does not only denote 'damaged'. Rather, it also conveys an unsettling deficit of political strength. Elizabeth's letter shows that, by the sixteenth century, even the more physical meaning of 'crased' has implications of insecurity and disturbance. Elizabeth's juxtaposition of 'crased' with 'shaken' intensifies this sense of agitation.

By the sixteenth century 'crased' had begun to associate with psychological ill health explicitly. For example, in this letter from the Earl of Oxford to John Paston III, written in 1503 or 1504, the word conveys an unusual mental state in his brother William, which accompanies his bodily 'sekenes': 'Your broder..ys so troubelid with sekenes and crasid in his myndes that I may not kepe hym aboute me'.⁶⁰ The use of 'crased' to imply both physical and emotional distress by Elizabeth Stonor witnesses its first steps towards this more modern, psychological, meaning. It remains to examine the practical impact of these interruptions of good health, according to the letters of the individuals who experienced them.

The Practicalities of Poor Health

The Stonor letters are rich in information about the practical implications of poor health. The writers explain that being unsound of body or mind is an inconvenience. Sickness impedes correspondence, delays journeys, and hinders business matters. The writers of the Stonor letters express their determination that normal service should be maintained, as far as possible, during poor health. The very survival of reports of sickness is due to a tendency to keep working and writing, even in the most adverse circumstances. This suggests that the practical impact of illness is minimized by a determination to 'carry on regardless'. As a result of this resilience, there are several long letters that include present tense reports of ill health, such as 'I am a litil diseset' (SC 1/46/217, letter 253).

Practicality is the strongest impetus for a quick recovery. If it is impossible to leave the sickbed, the Stonor correspondents often attend to their business remotely. They then write to explain their inability to attend in person. For example, Walter Herne describes himself as 'godes presoner' during a bout of sickness, complaining that he has been forced to remain in his chamber for four weeks (SC 1/46/174, letter 215). Herne's metaphorical language reflects the medieval link between physical and spiritual wellbeing, as he aligns bodily illness with spiritual failing, implying that the lying-in period is an act of repentance.⁶¹ This connection is witnessed in medieval literature. In Dante's *Purgatorio*, the bodily illnesses suffered by the sinners are inwardly punitive for their sins against God.⁶² The sinners are held captive until they are worthy of freedom from punishments for their spiritual malaise, such as the paralysis of sloth and the famishment of gluttony.⁶³

Herne writes a long letter to William Stonor by way of compensation for this 'imprisonment', explaining that he has not, as Stonor believed, received money from one of the family's tenants. He tells Stonor that he has made arrangements for another man, called Shepewesshe, to occupy his property. He petitions that Shepewesshe should be allowed to stay in place until he is well enough to discuss the matter in person. Finally, he expresses hope that he will be able to resume his work soon: 'and I may comyn with you of this mater whiche shal nott be longe by [*the*] grace of god'.

We have seen that reports of poor health are often vague in this corpus. However, if the practical concerns of the family justify it, the news can be strikingly detailed. During Thomas Betson's life-threatening sickness, there are a series of 'manoeuvres around his deathbed' that Carpenter declares 'rather distasteful'.⁶⁴ Kingsford is more forgiving of the

Stonors' attitude. He acknowledges that financial concerns prevail, but also recognises a conflicting love of the man himself: 'when he lay sick in 1479, Sir William Stonor seems to have been as much concerned for Betson's recovery as for the safety over his own money'.
65

The report of Betson's ill health is unusually detailed, with facts undeniably oriented towards the family's fiscal considerations. We learn that Betson, though gravely ill, makes Richard Bryan, the sender of the letter, 'gode chere' – as far as a sick man can (SC 1/46/142, letter 249). Bryan extends his good wishes and his desire for Betson to 'be of gode comfort', as politeness dictated. Bryan and his fellow visitors stay with Betson until tiredness overcomes him and he sleeps. With Betson fitfully unconscious, the conversation turns to financial matters. Bryan questions Betson's uncle and wife rigorously about his 'stok', or total wealth. In the letter, Bryan instructs Stonor to send two outstanding bills for payment to the deathbed. He advises that the dying man will endure until the messenger has arrived, but not necessarily any longer. Meanwhile, Bryan is pressuring Betson to make his wife, Elizabeth Stonor's daughter, sole executrix. He reports, in frustration, that he cannot yet determine whether Betson is agreeable, but that he will continue to apply pressure: 'I shall do as I can *with* goddes grace'.

A sense of frustrated anticipation also pervades a second letter from Bryan to Stonor. This contains the most vivid report of sickness in the corpus of Stonor letters. Bryan reveals that master Brinkley, the physician, has given Betson compresses to his head, stomach, and belly and that he has fallen into 'quiete reste' (SC 1/46/143, letter 250). This detail is provided to show that Betson's imminent death might be postponed, or avoided entirely: 'he will not determine him whether he shall live or dye'. The stagnation in Betson's condition has given Stonor's enemies time to petition him in secret: 'sir there hath be many speciall laburs and secrete I made sithen mastresse Iane and <we> I were come to the contrare disposicion that we come fore'. Ultimately, Bryan's diplomatic manoeuvring is futile, for Betson makes a recovery within a fortnight. Thomas Henham writes to William Stonor: 'Thomas Betson hys ryghte welle amendyde blesyde be Ihesu and he hys paste all dowyty off sekens and he takys þe sostenanse right welle' (SC 1/46/172, letter 251). Because this matter is crucial to Stonor's fiscal concerns, this report is furnished with extra detail about the strength of Betson's recovery: 'and as ffor ffusecyons ther come none vnto hym ffor he hase no nede off them'.

There is unique palaeographical evidence about the practicalities of poor health in this corpus of letters. Accurate and frequent written correspondence was important to the Stonor family, whose concerns were scattered between Oxfordshire, London and Calais. Several of the letters in the corpus are autograph – especially those by male correspondents. Even where clerks were used, urgency often promoted the sender to pen at least part of his letter. Female family members used clerks more commonly, but still took care to pen the final sentences, which contained the most personal information. The necessity, or desire, to include some autograph content, means that one letter from this corpus contains unique material evidence about the practical impact of ill health. This, combined with the descriptions of ill health outlined above, paints a vibrant picture of how it affected daily life.

A letter from Simon Stallworth to Sir William Stonor in 1483 shows how infirmity interferes with his ability to function as an advisor (Figure 1).

The first, and greater, portion of the letter is not in Stallworth's hand, so was probably written by a clerk.⁶⁶ Stallworth, presumably with his clerk no longer available, completes the letter with his own hand. He apologises for the quality of his autograph report about the execution of William, Lord Hastings, because he is too 'seke' to hold his pen. It may be, given the letter's subject matter of execution and imprisonment, that Stallworth is 'seke' with grief.⁶⁷ If so, his problems with pen control may have an emotional basis. However, if Stallworth indicates straightforward physiological illness, it clearly causes him problems with his motor functioning. A previous letter from Stallworth, written entirely in his own hand, was executed with much greater control (Figure 2). His chaotic writing in the later letter is evidence that his discomfort, whether mental or physical, interferes with his good intentions. The problems are so pronounced at this point, and the writer so fatigued by his effort, that he can barely hold his pen.

Conclusions

This article shows that, though there are some overlaps and ambiguities, the Stonor letters witness a distinction between the Middle English words, 'diseased' and 'sick'. The word 'diseased' does not map onto the modern meaning of the word, but instead represents symptoms, such as pain or discomfort. 'Sick' refers more generally to the condition of being 'unwell' and appears to encompass both underlying cause and presenting symptoms. Though the word 'crased' is used in reference to both male and female subjects in medieval sources, in the Stonor correspondence it is mostly associated with female health. Though it describes physiological disorder most directly, its application to women – whose psychological wellbeing is alluded to much more commonly – and its situation alongside accounts of busyness, anxiety and, potentially, pregnancy, suggest that it also relates to emotional distress. Philippa Maddern showed a connection between the word 'merry', which most commonly described physical wellbeing, and a state of pleasure and happiness. This article has shown that 'crased' was the antithesis of 'merry', indicating a combination of physical, psychological, emotional and, perhaps, spiritual malignity.

Reports of the practical impact of poor health abound in the Stonor family correspondence. However, the existence of letters containing references to poor health witnesses the senders' resilience and an expectation of a quick recovery. Where sickness precludes work entirely, the Stonor family and their correspondents take care to make arrangements for the execution of their duties. In addition to the verbal evidence, Letter 331 forms a striking material record of the practicalities of poor health. This letter, from Simon Stallworth to William Stonor is evidence for a man's endeavour to work, despite the distress that makes it difficult for him to write. As the man himself reports, 'I ame so seke þat I may not wel holde my penne'. The fact that he reports this at all is testament to a determination that poor health, whether physical or psychological, should have the smallest possible impact.

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Some of my lovinge friends & so departed to my lord Sandenale to the towne. For he is decessed
 & the more. & he lord helle is come to my lord protectour and dwelleth upon home. It is thoughte that
 he shall be the stand of my lord protectour & my lord of Exburyngton men in London. This is the more
 intent I knowe not but to keep the peace. My lord hath myghte besydes & more than he is contented with all.
 In any other waye wold be rayn the lord de/byschop of yorke the Bishop of Ely. In the time
 of grafter shynor kyngs I suppose they shall come some from the west & in men in the place for some
 tyme. And I suppose that I shall be sent some of my lord protectour to your lordship place
 no yet come. They do not like to come out of hand yett. No for the first he is
 in the place & more for the first. What shall happen
 here I knowe not. I praye you to praye me of my lord protectour & I am so sore yet
 I may not well hold my pen. I have the more yett. In London yett. I praye you
 to praye you to praye you of your friends
 all the lord shambles men be come
 my lord of Exburyngton men be come

 Thomas Stalborgh

Figure 1.

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