

# Bed and Bard

**P**EACOCK dung is good for vertigo. Infuse it in white wine overnight, strain it and take it for two weeks, measured by the phases of the moon. To cure a fever apply radishes bruised in salt and vinegar to the soles of the feet and a hen, newly cut through, to the head. To treat diseases of the ear or lungs use earthworms; for epilepsy, powdered human skull.

All the above recommendations appear in the casebook of Dr John Hall, a respected physician resident in Stratford-upon-Avon in the early 17th century. He also happened to be Shakespeare's son-in-law, having married the playwright's elder daughter, Susanna, in 1607.

If some of his prescriptions seem calculated to cause more anxiety than the original disease, others seem quite sensible. Scurvy was rife, especially among the upper classes who flaunted their wealth by living on meat. Dr Hall prescribed watercress. This was a favourite ingredient of his, but so were all kinds of plants and herbs which, no doubt, he grew in his garden.

Peter Whelan's new play, *The Herbal Bed*, is set in that garden at a time of crisis in the lives of the Halls. For the social position (and perhaps the livelihood) of this couple, pillars of the community, was threatened by an extraordinary accusation. It is well documented that in 1613 a young gentleman from nearby Alveston Manor, one John Lane, claimed that Susanna "had the runinge of the raynes and

Was Shakespeare's elder daughter involved in a scandalous love affair, resulting in an unpleasant disease? A new RSC production traces Susanna's spirited adventures. **HEATHER NEILL reports**

had bin naught with Rafe Smith". The scandalous nature of this was later obscured, however, by the mistranslation of "runinge of the raynes" to mean "wearing the trousers" or being too dominant in her husband's household.

In fact "raynes" means not reins but kidneys and the condition referred to is gonorrhoea. Shakespeare's daughter, accused of having contracted a venereal disease as the result of an affair (being "naught") with Rafe Smith, a local hatter, took Lane to the consistory (church) court in Worcester to clear her name. He failed to turn up and was excommunicated. So the matter, apparently, ended.

But could there have been any substance in Lane's accusation? Whelan says he feels a little guilty even suggesting the possibility that Shakespeare's daughter suffered from so unpleasant a disease. "It's not," he says, "what people want to hear." There is scarcely any evidence one way or the other. But why should Lane have invented such a vicious tale? No one knows, although he does seem to have been of questionable character. On the other hand, Susanna had only one child, which was unusual but scarcely conclusive evidence.

Whelan says he is dealing in "the shreds and patches of history —

which is useful because I can fill in the gaps."

We do know a few things about Susanna. She was born on 26 May, 1583, six months after her parents' marriage, when Shakespeare was still only 18. She was accused of being "popishly affected" in 1606, after she had failed to attend church to take Easter communion. (Only a year after the Gunpowder Plot, there was little sympathy for Catholic tendencies.) Nevertheless, she married Hall, known for his Puritan sympathies, the following year. She became a rich woman on her father's death in 1616.

Whelan had embarked on the play before he discovered the more lurid details of Lane's accusation. *The Herbal Bed* is, he says, about love and more particularly, a very topical idea — that breaking the rules of sexual conduct may be judged separately from other kinds of immorality. Bearing recent political examples in mind, Whelan talks of "looking through a window in the past at our own time. Somebody can be an upright citizen in every other respect but cheat in matters of love".

The specific historical connections are intriguing, however. Shakespeare wrote nothing after *The Tempest* in 1611. Whelan conjectures that illness was the reason



Alastair Muir

Passion play: Joseph Fiennes and Teresa Banham in *The Herbal Bed*

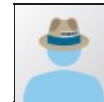
for his retirement to Stratford. Did Hall treat him? There is no evidence that he did. The cause of the poet's death remains obscure. Some, including Anthony Burgess, have suggested venereal disease. It is possible in such a case that Hall would have been too discreet to include details of it in his notes. He is known to have protected the identities of well-to-do local men who suffered from gonorrhoea.

If all this is speculation, the treatment in such cases is well-documented, and was even more wine-making than the ingestion

of a little lightly marinated peacock poo. Perforated lead plates were strapped to the back in the area of the kidneys, probably to cool the inflamed organs, medicines included winter cherry with opium and a powder made from ingredients such as sarsaparilla and guaiacum, a resin extracted from a West Indian wood. Finally, Hall inserted a lead pipe into the yard (penis) which was kept there "as long as he could".

● *The Herbal Bed* opens at *The Other Place* in Stratford tonight. Box office: 01789 295623.

## Herbal Bed Standard Preview



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