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Neurological literature: Headache (Part 7): Megrim

A Google search for megrim will reveal several definitions, including a species of left-eyed flatfish (the whiff, or *Lepidorhombus whiffiagonis*), although neurologists will recall that this word is also an archaic (some would say obsolete) word for migraine. (Pubmed contains no references to megrim, as far as I can ascertain.) Other usages of megrim are reported to include:

- a caprice, fancy, whim or fad (often in the plural, megrims); and
- depression, melancholy, low spirits or unhappiness.

An example of the latter usage is said to be from Samuel Richardson's *History of Sir Charles Grandison* (1753) wherein Lady G writes to Miss Byron (volume VI, letter xlv) "If these megrims are the effect of Love, thank Heaven, I never knew what it was".¹ It remains possible, however, that this could equally well refer to headaches. *Sir Charles Grandison* was the favourite novel of Jane Austen (1775-1817), large passages of which she knew by heart, and it may have been one stimulus, specifically imitation, for her use of headache as a plot device in several of her novels, as well as in other written work.²

Lane & Davies explain that Galen's term "hemigrana" was translated into low Latin as "hemigranea", and that through successive transliterations and abbreviations this evolved by the 16th century into megrim in English, denoting sick headache, blind headache and bilious headache³ (the latter term was still in common usage in the twentieth century, used for example by my maternal grandmother⁴). The Oxford English Dictionary has its earliest references to megrim in the sense of headache dating to the mid-fifteenth century, hence postdating the earliest recorded use of headache (ca. 1000AD) by more than four centuries.⁵ A seventeenth century translation of the *Chirurgical Works* of the French surgeon Ambroise Paré (1510-1590) includes the statement:

The Megrim is properly a disease affecting the one side of the head, right or left.

Perhaps most famously in the neurological context, the word megrim was used by Edward Liveing in the title of his 1873 work, one of the seminal works in the history of headache, *On Megrim, Sick-Headache, And Some Allied Disorders: A Contribution To The Pathology Of Nerve-Storms*⁶ which addressed his ideas on the pathophysiology of these headaches.⁷ The following year Sydney Ringer wrote in the *BMJ* on the action of hydrate of croton-chloral on megrim,⁸ and later in the same decade, 1879, Edward Nettleship noted that:

It is well known that certain of the subjects of megrim are liable to a very peculiar affection of sight, in which a part of the field of vision becomes obscured by a flickering or waving cloud, the edges of which in many persons

*are sharply defined, serrated and brilliantly coloured.*⁹

Galezowski used the term "ophthalmic megrim" to describe central retinal vein occlusion associated with migraine in 1882.¹⁰

Some literary uses of megrim may also be noted here, some almost contemporaneous with its aforementioned uses in the 19th century medical literature. The word was certainly known to George Eliot, pseudonym of Marian Evans (1819-1880). In *Adam Bede* (1859), her first major novel, it is said of one female character:

...it was a pity she should take such megrims into her head, when she might ha' stayed wi' us all summer, and eaten twice as much as she wanted, and it 'ud niver ha' been missed.

In *Felix Holt, the Radical* (1866), a character asks:

Can't one work for sheer truth as hard as for megrims?

OED records this as an example of megrims in the sense of a whim, fancy or fad. Another example may be Dr Tertius Lydgate in *Middlemarch* (1871-2) who is reported to be:

...abrupt but not irritable, taking little notice of megrims in healthy people.

Eliot's contemporary Wilkie Collins (1824-1889) was also familiar with the word. For example in *Armadale* (1866), one character asks of another:

How did you manage to clear your head of those confounded megrims?

The context suggests that this may refer to either fancies or low spirits, but in *The Moonstone* (1868), possibly Collins's best known work, its use certainly suggests the possibility of headaches:

This was the first attack of the megrims that I remembered in my mistress since the time when she was a young girl.

Moving to a more contemporary literary use of the word megrim, two examples may be found in the oeuvre of Stephen King (born 1947). In *Gerald's Game* (1992) it is used in the sense of fancy, whim, freak, caprice:

No, she thought her imagination had more than earned its right to a few hallucinatory megrims, but it remained important for her to remember she'd been alone that night.

In *Desperation* (1996), it is used in the sense of low spirits, unhappiness:

He was turning around, zipping his fly, talking mostly to keep the megrims away (they had been gathering like vultures just lately, those megrims), and now he stopped doing everything at once.

One can understand how this word may perhaps appeal to King's sensibilities.

On a final, musical, note, the composer Barry Ferguson uses megrim in his song *The Ruined Maid* (1997), again in the sense of melancholy, from a cycle of songs written for Catherine King (listen at www.catherineking.org). ♦