chapter 12

Popular Medicines and Practices in Galen

Danielle Gourevitch*

Introduction

Galen absolutely did not want to be taken for a ‘magus’, he hated ‘charlatans’, among whom he included his Methodist colleagues,1 and he despised the first century CE grammarian Pamphilus, who had compiled an important descriptive list of Egyptian plants in alphabetical order. But this author turned to old wives’ tales (muthous graôn) and to rubbishy Egyptian quackery and certain incantations (goêteias Aigyptias lërôdeis hama tisin epôïdaïs) that are pronounced while plants are being pulled up . . .; he uses them also for amulets (periapta) or for other magical procedures (magganeais) that are not only superfluous and foreign to the medical art, but also completely spurious. For our part we will not set forth any of that, nor the rubbishy transformations of these plants, because we consider that such tales are no use at all even for little children, let alone for those who are serious workers in the field of medicine’. (De simplicium medicamentorum facultatibus et temperamentis [De simpl. med. in what follows] VI prol. = K XI 792–793).2

One could say that the unfortunate Pamphilus had the excuse of not being a physician, while Galen was one and yet his work is full of old wives’ tales, received ideas, and anecdotes, plus ‘popular’ practices and recipes, that do not seem compatible with his own orthodoxy (which was itself rather complex).3

Which professions and which regions particularly inspired him? In which medical domains (surgery, pharmacy, the large and small problems of everyday

---

* Translation by Caroline Wazer, revised by the volume editor.
1 For this medical sect, see David Leith in this volume and Gourevitch 1991 and 1992. For the diffusion and the ‘popularity’ of this school, Nissen 2009.
2 The first eight books of this treatise date to Galen’s second stay in Rome, before the death of Marcus Aurelius in 180, and the three final chapters date to after 193, under Septimius Severus. My translation is based on Boudon-Millot 2012, 79–80.
3 Gourevitch and Grmek 1989.
life) were these ‘popular’ practices and so on particularly useful to him? Who did he practice them on? Why and how did he integrate these sources with his own knowledge, ‘academic’ before its time? Did he add one to the other, or rather shift from one to the other? This study may perhaps reveal a less arrogant and more humble Galen than the one we most often encounter.

Telling Stories

Opportunity makes a thief, and Galen often cites common experience in a relatively neutral way, or in any case without criticism. Sometimes he even makes it the starting point of his conduct or his reasoning, thinking that the anecdote will make matters clearer. Thus a tale about a ‘comical’ madman was likely to be helpful, shamelessly ensuring a knowing laugh and easy complicity. He met such unfortunates occasionally, without seeking them out; and could report experiences acquired by sight and by touch, such as anyone could have. Thus in De usu partium VI 20 (= Daremberg I 451 (slightly revised) = May I 329 = K III 506–7), Galen refers to absurd little stories, like the one about

the man who, counting his donkeys, forgot the one he was sitting on and accused his neighbors of having stolen it, or the other man who demanded back something that he was holding in his hand. I was present one day at such a scene, and I laughed heartily at a man who was very upset and was turning his house upside down looking for some gold coins that he was actually carrying in his hand, wrapped in a piece of papyrus. Faced with these exaggerated shouts, a calm man, speaking little, I think, would show the first the donkey which he was sitting on, and for the other he would make him touch his left hand with his right. I will act the same, I believe, regarding my adversaries. If they have eyes, I will show them the branch of the large artery (= the aorta) . . . if they are blind, I will take their hands and make them touch the vessels . . .

It will surprise no one, of course, that ‘experiences’ relating to food had much importance in public opinion, whether vulgar or philosophical, and that on

4 The first book was written for Boethos between 162 and 166; the rest (II–XII) date to the beginning of Galen’s second Roman stay (169–176).
5 Gourevitch 2005 or (in French) 2006; for traditional histories of madness, like the man who believes he is Atlas, Gourevitch 1983.