Physician
A Metapaedagogical Text

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Summary

It has generally been thought that the short treatise Physician was written for the beginning medical student and as such it has been criticized for being so superficial as to be worthless for producing anything but an empty charade of a physician. There are also numerous cruxes in the text on which scholars have failed to come to any consensus. This paper argues that by taking the audience of the treatise to be the beginning instructor rather than the beginning student the tone of and information included in the treatise can be seen to be appropriate and the textual cruxes can all be explained with little or no amendment by the same hypothesis.

Every scholar who has commented on the audience for Physician has believed that the treatise was intended for the beginning medical student.\(^1\) If this is the case, though, as Helen King has pointed out, the text operates on a central irony in that ‘in the very process of condemning deception, <it is> simultaneously teaching it.’\(^2\) That is, if the treatise is addressed to the medical student, although the author pays lip-service to the need to uphold the integrity of the profession, his handbook is little more than an induction into quackery offering only the most superficial instruction in medical techniques. Nor can the nature of the text be explained by assuming it is a collection of a student’s own lecture notes. In chapter 13 at the end of the treatise the author refers to what has preceded as ‘the things which have been written down’ (τῶν γεγραμμένων).\(^3\) The text is not an adumbration of a more detailed oral presentation.

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\(^1\) E.g., Littré (1861) 199-200; Petrequin (1877) 199; Bensel (1922) 102; Fleischer (1939) 55; Potter, following Jones (1995) 299.

\(^2\) King (1998) 42.

\(^3\) Hipp. Medic. 13 (9.218.13) L.
I do not dispute that the subject matter of *Physician* is the earliest stage of the medical education of an adult student. But if we assume that the intended audience is the novice *instructor* who is to provide the education rather than the student himself, the treatise falls into line with other Hippocratic works which warn against sharing medical knowledge with the uninitiated, and the author can be exonerated of the charge of intentionally producing a handbook for charlatans. He is aiming his remarks at a colleague who has been fully trained in medicine himself and merely needs direction in the best order in which to transmit his knowledge to indentured apprentices. This slight change in focus not only explains the whole tenor of the treatise, but also throws light on some of the more puzzling passages in the text.

The first of these is the opening sentence of the treatise which in the manuscript tradition reads ἤτροφον μὲν εἶναι προστασίην ὁρῆν εὐχρῶς τε καὶ εὐσαρκὸς ἔσται πρὸς τὴν ὑπάρχουσαν αὐτῶ φόσιν. The only other occurrence of προστασίη in the Hippocrates is in *Precepts* 10 where the author in discouraging the use of elaborate headgear and perfumes for self-promotion allows for a modicum of personal adornment because εὐχαρίη (urbanity) ‘is becoming a doctor’s προστασίη.’ In this passage the word seems to bear the connotation of ‘dignity’ and it is generally assumed that in *Physician* 1 προστασίη has the same meaning.

Heiberg prints the text as it stands in the mss., punctuating after προστασίην and treating the first four words as an introductory heading. This assumes an absolute use of the infinitive εἶναι that is used elsewhere in standard expressions such as ἐκὼν εἶναι, ‘willingly’, τὸ νῦν εἶναι, ‘regarding the present’ and τὸ κατὰ τοῦτον εἶναι, ‘as far as he is concerned’. The translation of his text would then run something like, ‘Regarding the dignity of a physician: he will be, to look at, of both good color and bodily condition with regard to his natural constitution.’ Many scholars accept the epexegetic use of the infinitive ὁρῆν qualifying ἔσται, but there are some problems with it.

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4 Traditionally doctors came from the ranks of a few medical families and would have been immersed in medical lore from childhood. Hipp. *Lex* 2-3 (4.638.13, 640.8-9 L.) recommends instruction from childhood, παιδεμαθή, and *Praec.* 13 (9.268.6-270.3 L.) is scathing on the faults of late-learning, ὀψιμαθή.


6 Hipp. *Praec.* 10 (9.266.13 L.)

7 But see below p. 55.

8 See Smyth 2012 and also Pl. *Prot.* 317a1 and Is. *Men.* 32. I am assuming this is Heiberg’s understanding of the text. His edition contains no commentary or translation.