IV. Galen and the Hippocratic tradition
Galen, Satire and the Compulsion to Instruct

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Summary

This chapter explores Galen’s attitude toward instruction and teaching, and in particular the ways in which he conceptualized and articulated the didactic function of his writings. Galen’s own rhetoric about why he wrote was often strident – his disparagement of contemporaries is famous, and his fondness for polemic is often regarded as a function of an eristic and arrogant personality. I suggest, however, that Galen’s self-avowed role as a kind of public censor may derive as much from an amalgamation of rhetorical postures found in various literary and philosophical genres as it does from an inherently intemperate character. By examining various passages in Galen’s protreptic and psychological works, I argue that his frequent stances of vituperative indignation and self-righteousness often resemble those found in satirical writings, from Cynic diatribe through Greek and Roman satirical poetry. Galen no doubt felt himself to be working in a serious tradition of Platonic and Stoic moralizing, but his particular form of didacticism was informed by various strategies assimilated from Greco-Roman serio-comic traditions.

Almost as famous as Galen’s contributions to the history of medicine is the vivid and complex autobiographical voice he deployed in his writings. At times self-confident, brash and vituperative, at other times almost humble and folksy, Galen seems to have had a reasonably good idea of the impression he wanted to make on his readers. He frequently intimates that in a perfect world he would be content to live dutifully and unobtrusively, ministering quietly to the sick, and teaching others, privately or publicly, if asked. He often claims that he would be happy to write or dictate his thoughts for friends or pupils, but not necessarily with formal publication in mind. The world, however, is never perfect, and the Galen we come to know from his writings often displays quite a different character: despite his professed desire for a quiet medical career balancing scholarship and service, his own rhetoric is often at odds with this ideal, especially as he presents himself drawn into the fray, surrounded as he often claims to be, by the ignorance and pretense...