
How does an historian present the story of a subject, the Oath of Hippocrates, which has maintained its significance over an enormous period of time, yet which does not appear to lend itself to a clear narrative? This was the issue confronting Thomas Rütten, Reader in the History of Medicine at Newcastle University in the United Kingdom. Rütten’s solution was to produce, not a definitive history of the Oath, but instead a set of stories (Geschichten) which together are offered to illustrate its complex, varied presence throughout history. Moreover, Rütten decided to embrace this complexity and represent it by dispensing with the constraints of a book entirely and producing a CD as part of a joint project with the Herzog August Bibliothek in Wolfenbüttel. As the author makes clear in the “liner notes” that accompany the CD, the choice of medium was more a historiographic statement about the Oath’s fundamental textual irreducibility than it was just another way to carry out a publishing project.

With such goals in mind, the CD is designed as a two-by-two matrix of historical periods and topics. The most basic division of the material, accessible across the bottom of the main screen, is between six historical eras, ranging from Antiquity (lasting until 500 CE), up through the “Modern” era, which is reckoned here to have begun in 1850. Within each of the eras, there is a second division between 1) a discussion of the Oath’s textual presence in the given era; 2) how it was understood and commented on, essentially a history of the reception of the Oath as a document; 3) discussion of the given era’s legal, customary, and ethical contexts; and 4) a final section, labeled “Kitsch und Kunst” which presents the Oath in varied cultural niches. It is possible to scan across different eras while holding steady on one of these topics. That is, the CD offers the user the possibility of surveying one particular topic, say, the ethical and legal framework, while clicking through different eras. (I might add here that the CD also features a piano composition for three hands, an “Instrumentalization of the Hippocratic Oath” which was composed in 1984 and performed in Bremen. I found the piece impenetrably opaque, but a more sophisticated listener might respond otherwise.)

To say the least, the material on this CD is extraordinarily rich, and it displays Rütten’s sure-handed command of his subject. He begins by recounting how the Oath first came to attention. There are no traces of its existence before the third century CE, from which time a small papyrus fragment found in Egypt in 1900 is dated. The
fragment contains a portion of the Oath written in a style out of keeping with the other medical writings of that era – an indication, Rütten claims not unreasonably, of the variety of audiences by whom the Oath was already known. The text’s attribution to Hippocrates of Cos is highly debatable. The problem of attribution of course is one that applies to most of the “Hippocratic Corpus,” but in the case of the Oath the problem is especially acute because of the exceedingly late date of the text’s first appearance. Rütten notes references made to the Oath’s contents by the first-century CE grammarian Erotian and by Soranus, among others, but he adds that this still leaves centuries yawning between their lifetimes and that of the Oath’s supposed author.

Whatever its dubious origins, Rütten succeeds admirably in conveying an understanding of the Oath’s complex place in history, particularly in juxtaposition to the changing professional and ethical/legal environments of medical practice. Yet the CD also has its problems. Most significantly, the intended audience for this publication is rather ill-defined. Its primary audience does not appear to have been Rütten’s peers among historians of medicine, for he devotes little effort to reviewing debates and previous work on related subjects. The CD does contain references to the scholarly literature done in the brief parenthetical form (Name, Date), but since there is no bibliography to be found anywhere, either on the CD itself or in the liner notes, all but the most obvious references are nearly useless. This surely was a production mistake — no one would intentionally include references of this kind in the text without also intending to complete the citations with a bibliography. Yet the glitch betrays a deeper ambiguity with respect to the audience, for if, as I said above, the primary audience is not fellow academic historians, then for whom was the CD produced? Non-specialist readers will find the material heavy going, not because the author’s style is difficult or ponderous — to the contrary, it is lucid and quite lively — but because the material is fairly detailed and lacks the overview and “take-home messages” that one imagines a non-specialist would hope to find in such a publication. My best guess is that the CD was produced for an audience of M.D.’s who have a scholarly and historical interest in their profession. This is not to say that non-specialist historians will not also find something here of interest, for they surely will. But the anecdotal framework will hinder access somewhat and the lack of references will prevent it from being a research tool.

One final remark might be made about the graphic design and layout of the CD, and here it must be said that I do not believe the author was well served by the people who undertook this work for the project. The interface and graphic design are rather primitive, lacking explanatory tooltips or indeed any kind of information to guide the user/reader into the CD. If someone wants to know how the CD is arranged, it would be necessary to read the liner notes, or do as I did, which was just to start clicking on things. It was not so very difficult to figure out what was going on after about ten minutes or so, but it was not exactly a user-friendly interface. Furthermore, the overall quality of the graphic design had a certain “mid-1990s” look to it, although it should be added that the CD is enriched with a bounty of illustrations drawn from