PAULUS SISMUS, FORGOTTEN PHYSICIAN

A book on diet published in 1604? How interesting. And so it is, but things are not quite what they seem and to satisfy our appetite we shall first have to get through some rather mixed hors d’oeuvres.

The date on the title-page of Pauli Sismi ... Tractatus de diëtâ is printed in round Roman numerals as CI D.1 DD.IV, with the C after the D the wrong way round. The printer and his publisher seeing what looked to them like two Cs in succession were perfectly satisfied. But their ignorance of Roman numerals was equalled only by their ignorance of Latin grammar, for the imprint reads: Hagæ-Comitis, apud Aegidius [sic!] a Limburg. The author probably never saw the title-page in proof or did not bother with that part of it which was of so little concern to him. But one can imagine his annoyance when the finished book reached him and his pleasure turned to shame over such carelessness.

The book seems to be scarce. No copies are found in the Bibliotheca Medica Neerlandica¹ or the catalogue of the Bibliotheque Nationale, though both contain other works by the same author. Neither Hirsch² nor Garrison and Morton³ know his name which is likewise unrecorded in general biographical dictionaries. The General Catalogue of the British Library lists this book with the plain date 1604 without batting an eyelid. (This will of course be remedied.) One other copy is described in the National Union Catalogue (NUC) as present in the US National Library of Medicine, and here, quite rightly, the date is questioned as perhaps erroneous. However, after this cautious observation the modern cataloguer has succumbed to the infection of the carelessness transmitted by the printer. The reason which he adduces for his doubt is not the faulty Roman numeral, it is not the typography of the book, so untypical for the early seventeenth century, not the known period of Gilles van Limburg’s activity as a publisher in The Hague,⁴ but the date of death of the dedicatee whom he names as Johan vander Meer, 1589–1652,⁵ followed by the remark that the year 1619 is mentioned in the text. Had he read the title-page in front of him he would have seen that the Tractatus is prominently addressed to Jonatan [sic!] vander Meer, a fellow physician at Amsterdam, and not to any Johan of whom, by the way, there were several,⁶ so that the choice of the one who died in 1652 and who was a Roman Catholic priest, was doubly unfortunate. Instead of searching for the dates of a misread dedicatee he would have spent his time to better purpose searching for details about Paulus Sismus himself. His name

¹ Bibliotheca Medica Neerlandica. Catalogus van de Bibliotheek der Nederlandsche Maatschappij tot Bevordering der Geneeskunst. 3 vols. (Amsterdam 1930–80). This library is on permanent loan to the University Library of Amsterdam.
⁶ See e.g. A.J. van der Aa, Biographisch woordenboek der Nederlanden, vol. 12 (Haarlem [1869]), pp. 476–7, for a lawyer and a painter, both of the 17th century.
occurs in the Leiden Album studiosorum where he is inscribed as a student of philosophy in 1672, aged 26, of Rotterdam. So much for a possible date of publication of the Tractatus by 1652! Jonathan vander Meer may be as elusive as Paulus Sismus, or more so, but at least where both their names are printed together on one title-page let them be recorded truthfully. The date as printed on that title-page can only be a very easily made mistake for 1704. The correction does not alter or diminish the merits of the advice on healthy living contained in the book.

It is even possible, without any great effort, to assemble further particulars of the man and his works. In the Tractatus itself he mentions The Hague as his place of residence, but he did not live there all his professional life. Other known books of his were published at Rotterdam and there is a definite reference to him as a practitioner in his native city in the thesis submitted at Leiden University in 1695 by a certain Cornelius Sismus, a native of Haarlem and then aged 21, who dedicates his Disputatio medica inauguralis de suffocatione stomachica to Hubertus, Jacobus and Paulus Sismus, ‘Medicinae doctoribus inter Roterdamenses celeberrimis ac practicis in eadem civitate vigilantissimis, adgnatis ac amicis meis’, which adds a nice human touch to our knowledge of him.

His portrait is mentioned by P. A. Tiele as part of his guide to Rome which is also listed in the catalogue published by the Dutch Book Trade Association on the occasion of their exhibition of Dutch books in 1910 and in the NUC: Korte beschryvingh van ’t hof en stad van Romen, published by Marcus van Rossum at Rotterdam in 1684. The title suggests that Sismus had visited Rome.

A further characteristic is shown in a book in the British Library: Pauli Sismi... In librum Hippocratis De natura humana commentarius. In quo Carthesius & imprimis Cornelius Bontekoe refutantur, which Gerard van Wyen printed at Rotterdam in 1689. Here he pitted himself against the Einstein of his age, but he was not the only pigmy to attack that giant Descartes. So convinced was he of the correctness of his own and the general traditional views in medicine that he adds a little note to the title-page saying that this ancient art was properly communicated by Hippocrates and Galen for all time and that any one wanting to change it and who even gloried in discoveries of his own was a liar and deceived, for such a thing was impossible. Not, then, one of the deeply enquiring minds of his century.

Other works by Paulus Sismus are to be found. The same catalogue of the Dutch Book Trade Association and the Bibliotheca Medica Neerlandica contain his Tractatus aureus de cancro of gulde tractaetje van de kanker (Rotterdam, Isaak van Ruynen, 1692). In the catalogue of the Bibliothèque Nationale at Paris is his Philosophia triumphans, quae continent generalem praecipue amoenissimamque mundi historiam... Pars prima (Rotterdam, Van Hoogstraten, 1685). And the NUC informs us that, besides the Tractatus de diaeta and the Korte beschryvingh van ’t hof en stad van Romen, an American library has his Een prince Phaeton, met twee vleugelen vliegende, namelijk onkunde en vermetelheyt, wort door sijn vader Phoebus sachtmoedighlijck herstelt. Ofte grondigh verhael vande sekerheit der medicine (Rotterdam, Gerard van Wyen, 1690).

7 Album studiosorum Academiae Lugduno-Batavae MDLXXV–MDCCCCLXXV (Hagae-Comitis 1875), col. 576.
8 ibid., col. 731. Copy in B.L. Is the phenomenon a consequence of failure to keep a diet?
9 P. A. Tiele, Nederlandsche bibliographie van land- en volkenkunde (Amsterdam 1884: repr. Amsterdam 1966), No. 1006. The portrait is not mentioned in the portrait catalogues of Frederik Muller or A.J. van Someren.
10 Catalogus van boeken in Noord-Nederland verschenen van den vroegsten tijd tot op heden (’s-Gravenhage 1911), ch. 6, col. 39.
11 ibid., ch. 7, col. 77; Bibliotheca Medica Neerlandica, vol. 1, p. 320.