

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-52558-9 - The Cambridge Companion to Galen

Edited by R. J. Hankinson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

R. J. HANKINSON

1 The man and his work

Galen was born in September AD 129, in Pergamum on the Ionian seaboard of Asia Minor. He died sometime in the second decade of the third century, probably in Rome.¹ He lived, and worked, until well into his eighties; and over the course of that long and productive life wrote (or rather dictated, sometimes more than one treatise at a time, to relays of slaves)² a vast number of works on a wide variety of topics, ranging from medicine, through logic and philosophy, to philology and literary criticism. Many – indeed most – of these books are lost; but we are fortunate to possess two short texts from Galen's own hand that deal with his output: *On My Own Books* (*Lib.Prop.*) XIX 8–48, = *SM* 2, 91–114,³ and *The Order of My Own Books* (*Ord.Lib.Prop.*) XIX 49–61, = *SM* 2, 80–90;⁴ the latter deals with the order in which an aspirant doctor should read them, while the former was written in order, he says, to help people determine which of the many works circulating under his name was genuine. These lists are not exhaustive: several indisputably genuine texts fail to appear in them, either because they were written later, or because for whatever reason Galen chose to disown them; moreover the Greek text suffers from several *lacunae* (although some of these have been filled from Arabic sources and by way of a newly recovered Greek manuscript in Véronique Boudon's recent edition).⁵ But a fair proportion, particularly of the medical output, does survive (in fact it constitutes the most extensive surviving corpus of any ancient author, accounting for about 10 per cent of what we possess of Greek prior to AD 350);⁶ and this, along with the bibliographical information supplied by the two texts just mentioned, allows us to form a three-dimensional picture of Galen, the man and his achievement.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-52558-9 - The Cambridge Companion to Galen

Edited by R. J. Hankinson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Second-century Pergamum was a great and thriving city, one of the largest of Asia Minor;⁷ and Galen was born into a good family in it. His father, Nicon, whom he revered, was an architect (a profession that encompassed that of engineer), and he ensured that Galen received the best possible liberal education, as well as providing him with an exemplar of the life well lived, both morally and intellectually (*The Passions of the Soul* [*Aff.Dig.*] V 40, = *SM* I 31,9–12). His mother, by contrast was a bad-tempered shrew, prone to biting her servants, as well as screaming at and attacking her husband (40–1, = *SM* I 31, 12–14). Galen apparently never married (nor do we hear of any brothers or sisters); and, while he treats women patients, and will listen to advice from midwives, his world as he portrays it is almost exclusively a masculine one, and he frequently seems to find female company irritating. When the wife of Boethus, whom he was treating, faints in the bath, Galen berates her maidservants for standing around screaming and wailing, and doing nothing to help (*Praen.* XIV 643–4, = 112,12–114,2), although a little earlier he has described her chief nurse as ‘a most excellent woman’. An exception is his attitude to the female Platonist Arria whom, at the very end of his life, he describes as ‘dearest of all to me, and most highly praised by all on account of her rigorous philosophising and her great appreciation for Plato’s writings’ (*On Theriac to Piso* [*Ther.Pis.*] XIV 218); but this is indeed exceptional. And while he allows that ‘women are similar to men in that they are rational animals, that is capable of acquiring knowledge’⁸ (in apparent contrast with Aristotle), he still thinks (in common with most ancient theorists) that women are in general markedly inferior to men, on account of their being adapted for childbearing (see, e.g., *On the Utility of the Parts* [*UP*] IV 145–58, = ii 286,13–296,7 Helmreich).

Moreover, he evinces an ascetic distaste for sexual excess in general, and homosexuality in particular (homosexuals are derided as ‘woolworkers’: *On the Therapeutic Method* [*MM*] X 10–11; cf. *On Affected Parts* [*Loc.Aff.*] VIII 225–6), and his attitude to such practices as fellatio and cunnilingus is equally puritanical (*On the Powers [and Mixtures] of Simple Drugs* [*SMT*] XII 248–50). He understands that sex is extremely pleasurable (indeed, a providential Nature has made it so in order to ensure the continuation of species: *UP* IV 144, 181–2, = ii 285,27–286,12, 314,19–315,4); and Galen expresses his deep admiration at the marvellous skill of the Creator in constructing

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-52558-9 - The Cambridge Companion to Galen

Edited by R. J. Hankinson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The man and his work

3

the functional architecture of the penis (*UP* IV 211–19, = ii 337,3–342,20).⁹ But he still thinks that a preoccupation with sex is bestial, and incompatible with the highest human life (*The Best Doctor is also a Philosopher* [*Opt.Med.*] I 59, = *SM* 2, 6,3–9). His treatise *On Moral Character* (*Mor.*), which survives only in an Arabic epitome,¹⁰ takes the fact that people tend to satisfy their appetites (particularly their sexual ones) in private as a sign that they are aware of their shameful and unworthy nature: ‘the rational soul behaves like this when the appetitive soul attempts to win it over to desiring sexual intercourse, since it sees that this is harmful both to the body and to the soul’ (*Mor.* 2, 245–6 Mattock). In fact, it is not even true to say that ‘pleasure is the goal of the appetitive soul . . . The goal of the appetitive soul is the [preservation of the] life of the body, and the pleasures of food and sexual intercourse are like the bait that is placed in the trap in order to snare the animal’ (*ibid.*, 249). Finally, in *On Affected Parts* (*Loc.Aff.*) VIII 417–21, he notes that, while the retention of semen and menstrual fluid, even in small amounts, can have serious pathological effects, and hence that regular sexual release is a good idea for purposes of regimen, this doesn’t mean one should do it for fun. Indeed, he praises the example of Diogenes the Cynic for relying on masturbation rather than loose women for such purposes ‘as all moderate men should’. It is hard to resist the temptation of essaying a Freudian ‘explanation’ for all of this.

At all events, from his father’s example (and in horrified reaction against that of his mother), he learned to despise the siren lures of wealth and reputation, and to treat the slings and arrows of fortune with indifference (*ibid.* 42–5, = 32,11–35,3). Nicon also looked after his son’s physical health, prescribing him a regimen that kept him free of the sort of illness that attacked his more acratie friends (*On Good and Bad Humours* [*Bon.Mal.Suc.*] VI 755–6, = *CMG* V 4,2, 392,21–393,11). At *Ord.Lib.Prop.* XIX 59, = *SM* 2, 88,7–15, Galen praises his father for having given him an excellent grounding in grammar and mathematics, and he says that he began to study logic at fourteen. He learned philosophy from leading adherents of the major schools, Platonic, Aristotelian, Stoic and Epicurean, carefully selected by his father for their moral and intellectual virtues (cf. *Aff.Dig.* V 41–2, = *SM* 1 31,23–32,11), although as he later tells us he was less than impressed with some of their arguments. Indeed he seemed well on his way to a career as a philosopher when his father,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-52558-9 - The Cambridge Companion to Galen

Edited by R. J. Hankinson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

moved by a dream, decided that he should take up medical studies as well (*Ord. Lib. Prop.* XIX 59, = *SM* 2, 88, 13–17).¹¹

This he did with equal determination and drive, seeking out instruction from a variety of different doctors. At Pergamum he studied with Satyrus (whom he accuses of peddling misleading interpretations of Hippocrates: *Ord. Lib. Prop.* XIX 57–8, = *SM* 2, 87, 8–19), but on his father's death in AD 149, at which he no doubt came into a considerable fortune (notwithstanding his protestations of asceticism and indifference to money; his father had been a landowner: *On the Properties of Foodstuffs* [*Alim. Fac.*] VI 552–53, = *CMG* V 4, 2, 261, 6–24; *Bon. Mal. Suc.* VI 755, = *CMG* V 4, 2, 393, 1), he travelled first to Smyrna to study with Pelops, a leading Rationalist physician¹² (he wrote some early works here, two of which survive: *On the Anatomy of the Uterus* [*Ut. Diss.* II 887–908, = *CMG* V 2, 1], and *On Medical Experience* [*Med. Exp.*, = Walzer, 1944]: *Lib. Prop.* XIX 16–17, = *SM* 2, 97, 6–23) where he also attended lectures by the Platonist Albinus (*Lib. Prop.* XIX 16–7, = *SM* 2, 97, 6–98, 11; cf. *On Hippocrates' 'Nature of Man'* [*HNH*] V 136, = *CMG* V 9, 1, 70, 8–15), and then to Corinth and finally Alexandria and elsewhere in search of the leading anatomist of the day, Numisianus (*On Anatomical Procedures* [*AA*] II 217–8;¹³ cf. *On Black Bile* [*At. Bil.*] V 112, = *CMG* V 4, 1, 1, 75, 17).

He returned to Pergamum in AD 157 where he was offered the job of physician at the gladiatorial school 'even though I was young, only 28', a job which naturally afforded him the best possible on-the-job training in orthopaedic surgery, and in which, by his own account, he was unprecedentedly successful: although many had died under his predecessors, he hardly lost a single patient. Thus his initial contract was renewed four successive times, and he held the post for four years, until the autumn of 161.¹⁴

Shortly thereafter, he left Pergamum to seek his fortune in Rome, motivated in part apparently by the political unrest which had broken out there (which he characterizes with the loaded, Thucydidean term '*stasis*': *Praen.* XIV 622–3, = *CMG* V 8, 1, 92, 6–10; cf. 648, = 116, 27; this is one of several episodes that reveal Galen to be of a somewhat timid disposition, at least as far as his own physical safety was concerned). But before arriving in Rome he travelled extensively around the eastern Mediterranean to investigate local herbal and mineral remedies, and he frequently reports on what he

The man and his work

5

observed.¹⁵ He recorded the local names for grain-plants in Thrace and Macedonia (*Alim.Fac.* VI 513–14, = *CMG* V 4,2, 236,13–27). He visited Cyprus in search of useful minerals (*SMT* XII 171, 227, 229, 231–8, etc.), even going down a copper mine in search of ore (*On Antidotes* [*Ant.*] XIV 6); and he ventured as far as Palestine in search of bitumen and other medicinally useful substances to be found around the Dead Sea (*SMT* XII 171, 203).

In Rome, at any rate by his own account, his rise, both social and professional, was meteoric and, again by his own account, entirely due to his own brilliance. The various cases recounted in *Praen.* afford our most important, if evidently partial (in both senses of the word) evidence for this; but I begin with a tale told in the relatively late *On Affected Parts* (*Loc.Aff.*) VIII 361–6. At the very beginning of his first Roman sojourn, he tells us, his superior knowledge and ability at differential diagnosis won him the admiration and support of the philosopher Glaucon, whom (or so at least he says) he came upon by chance in the street, and who asked him to visit a patient who was suffering from a diarrhoea of the sort often, apparently, mischaracterized by incompetent doctors as dysentery. Glaucon, as a philosopher, is keen to test whether Galen really can perform correct diagnoses and prognoses ‘which seem more akin to divination than medicine’. Galen duly obliges, and makes several crucial observations, including that of bloody serum in the stool which is, he says, a clear sign of liver disease, a diagnosis he verifies by palpation of the patient’s abdomen, and which is confirmed by observation of the pulse and other signs which lead him to conclude that the liver is not merely weakened but actually inflamed. In this case the patient was also a doctor; and Galen infers from a preparation of hyssop and honeywater that he sees by the window that he had diagnosed himself as suffering from pleurisy. This good fortune allows him to impress Glaucon all the more, as he is now able to tell the patient where he is feeling pain; Glaucon, wrongly supposing that Galen has made this determination from the pulse alone, is all the more astonished, an astonishment compounded when Galen is able to predict that he will feel the desire to cough, and will in fact cough at very long intervals. Again by chance this prediction is vindicated almost immediately. Next he is able to make further predictions and retrodictions of the course of the illness which are also, as he admits, partly due to good fortune (although these are not simply lucky guesses),

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-52558-9 - The Cambridge Companion to Galen

Edited by R. J. Hankinson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

which the patient confirms. Finally, he is able to reveal the patient's own mistaken diagnosis, much to the latter's surprise:

And from this time onwards, Glaucon held both myself and the entire medical art in the highest regard, whereas previously he had not esteemed it highly, simply because he had never come across men worthy of respect who were versed in it. (*Loc.Aff.* VIII 366)

The moral of the story, Galen tells his readers, is that doctors need to remember how important it is to know which symptoms are proper to particular diseases and which common to several, which are always associated with a particular ailment, which for the most part, which half of the time, and which rarely.¹⁶ But they also need to be able to grasp opportunities offered by good fortune, such as happened in this case: 'for while good fortune often provides many opportunities for achieving a great reputation, still most people are unable to avail themselves of them on account of their ignorance' (*ibid.*).

That story exemplifies in a particularly clear manner several features of Galen's autobiographical style. Most obviously, Galen was able to move with relative ease in the highest social circles almost as soon as he arrived in Rome. Although he invariably portrays his success as the result of his own ability, integrity and industry, as well as his talent for unmasking the baseless pretensions of his rivals, it is evident that he availed himself of both his own social standing and of various connections with his family at Pergamum.¹⁷ The first case he recounts in *Praen.* was the cure of a fellow Pergamene living in Rome, the Peripatetic philosopher Eudemus, who had apparently known Galen's father: at any rate he knew of the dreams that had made Nicon turn him towards medicine, although apparently he also thought that for Galen this was merely a sideline, considering him rather to be a philosopher like himself (*Praen.* XIV 608, = 76,26–78,2 Nutton).¹⁸

But while it was important for Galen that philosophers should accept him as one of their own, he was equally concerned to be taken seriously as a doctor, in both theory and practice. This accounts for the centrality of a philosopher, Glaucon, in the story from *Loc.Aff.* Glaucon is evidently already known to him, but in what circles and for what reasons it is not clear – in any event, he is at least presented as not yet having first-hand knowledge of Galen's clinical prowess.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-52558-9 - The Cambridge Companion to Galen

Edited by R. J. Hankinson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The man and his work

7

Philosophers might be expected to understand the true reasons for successes of this sort, and not to dismiss them as mere divination, or, worse, as witchcraft. In the characteristic polemic against the degeneracy of the times with which he begins *Praen.*,¹⁹ Galen rails at the pseudo-doctors who make their way by flattery and insinuation, who gain pupils by making the art out to be easy (XIV 599–601, = 68,3–70,1 Nutton).²⁰ But worst of all, when a good man makes a sound prediction on the basis of methodical understanding, proper training, long experience, precise observation and rational deduction, far from receiving the acclaim he deserves he is suspected of sorcery (which is a good deal worse than the mere slur that scientific prognosis is nothing but fortune-telling),²¹ and will incur the malicious enmity of the others, who will conspire against him, as they did against Quintus ('the best doctor of his generation') and force him either into silence or exile on trumped-up charges (*Praen.* XIV 601–3, = 70,1–72,12 Nutton). Good men are compelled to abandon the fray, 'leaving it to the scoundrels to obtain a reputation'; this is caused by the materialism and hedonism of their rich clients who value nothing unless it leads to pleasure ('geometry and arithmetic they need only in calculating expenses and improving their mansions'); worst of all, they abandon philosophy for sophistry; 'at any rate, as Plato says somewhere, in a contest between a doctor and a cook before a jury of children or fools, the cook would win by a wide margin' (*Praen.* XIV 603–5, = 72,13–74,11 Nutton).²²

All of this is couched in lurid and at times barely coherent terms; Galen was never one to pull his polemical punches. But it betrays a depth of feeling which is hard to gainsay; and it is, as I said, entirely characteristic of the man and his work (although one may discern a certain mellowing in his attitude that comes with increasing age and security). It comes as no surprise to discover that another work of autobiography (and no doubt of self-promotion, not to say autohagiography, as well as moral philosophy) was entitled *On Slander*.²³

At any event, Galen presents the cure of Eudemus, which was certainly not his first clinical essay in Rome, and perhaps post-dated the Glaucon episode (*Praen.* XIV 605, = 74,12–15 Nutton), as a turning-point in his career, but also in his worldly education.²⁴ Having no idea, as a naive provincial, of the wickedness of the big city, he simply went about his business, oblivious of the malicious gossip he was incurring. The case is described in unusually precise detail, even

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-52558-9 - The Cambridge Companion to Galen

Edited by R. J. Hankinson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

for Galen (it occupies *Praen.* XIV 605–19, = 74,12–88,13 Nutton). The details are designed to emphasize the complexity of the case, and also how the other doctors involved failed to measure up to them. It is a feature of medicine as it was practised at the time (at least the medicine of the elite) that several doctors were often summoned to the patient's bedside, where they made competing diagnoses and prognoses, leaving the patient, or his representatives, to choose among them.²⁵

As Galen presents the case, he was regularly at odds with the advice of the other doctors; and he was regularly proved right. He suspects that the illness is more serious than the others (and indeed the patient himself) suppose: it may be an incipient quartan fever (XIV 606–7, = 74,17–76,8).²⁶ In due course, Galen's forebodings are borne out; and Eudemus comes to rely upon him, particularly as 'fortuitously, at the same time' Galen was able to make a similarly successful prognosis (XIV 607–9, = 76,8–78,10). Even so, the other doctors demur, prescribing a strong drug (theriac),²⁷ which Galen says will be worse than useless (XIV 609–11, = 78,10–80,1). And so indeed it proves, particularly when the other doctors administer a second dose (XIV 611, = 80,1–5). Galen makes further predictions on the basis of the pulse and examination of urine (XIV 611, = 80,5–15). Eudemus is then joined by Sergius Paulus, shortly to become the prefect of the city, and Flavius Boethus, an ex-consul and future governor of Palestine, who will subsequently help Galen in his ascent, both of whom happen to be students of Aristotelian philosophy, and he tells them too of Galen's past successes and latest prognostics. When these, too, are vindicated, 'Eudemus was amazed, and revealed my predictions to all his visitors, who included almost all of the social and intellectual leaders of Rome' (XIV 611–12, = 80,15–25). Boethus, it turns out, had heard of Galen, and had invited him 'to give a demonstration of how speech and breath are produced and by what organs' (XIV 612, = 80,25–7); of which more later. At this point, things begin to get ugly; Galen now says that he will be able to cure Eudemus, a position ridiculed by the other doctors, who now accept that their patient has been stricken three times with quartan fever (and hence suppose the case to be hopeless). Here for the first time, Galen says, he becomes aware that his enemies are motivated by jealousy, and that they seek to win over the lay-people present (XIV 613–14, = 82,8–31). Of course, his opponents' slanders are exposed for what

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-52558-9 - The Cambridge Companion to Galen

Edited by R. J. Hankinson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The man and his work

9

they are, even though they continue to accuse him of practising divination (XIV 614–15, = 84, 1–10); and Galen triumphantly predicts the successful outcome of the disease, much to their discomfiture (XIV 615–17, = 84, 10–86, 7). Eudemus, being a philosopher, asks for a complete account of how Galen arrived at his opinion, which Galen duly does; and Eudemus, confident now in the final result, says: ‘you have reasoned out your discovery of what is to come as a logician should’ (XIV 617–28, = 86, 7–30): high praise indeed from a philosopher.

It is worth briefly relating this case, and Galen’s presentation of it, to the previous one. Here again a philosopher figures, although in this case one with excellent social and political connections. He is thus disposed to appreciate the rigour of Galen’s methods, and to see through the sophistry of the other quacks. As Galen presents it, it is this fact, allied to Galen’s evident practical success, which tips the balance. Galen not only gets things right; he can explain how it is that he does so, at least in general terms and at least to the logically literate. The logically illiterate, of course, hate him all the more for that. There is, however, one obvious difference between the two cases. In the first, Galen emphasizes how good luck helped him make a good impression; and he conceals, at least for a time, the basis for some of his predictions. In the second, everything is presented as being above board. It is not that Galen exactly engages in sharp practice in the first; but his *modus operandi* at least seems somewhat at odds with the persona of openness adopted in the second. All of which should put us on our guard when faced with Galen’s very considerable rhetorical and persuasive skills. He is invariably the hero in his own drama; but just what kind of hero – a cunning Odysseus, a frank Achilles – varies from drama to drama. For all that, we should not allow such observations to take us too far into cynicism. Galen’s extraordinary industry is irrefutable. He did make a big splash, if not perhaps invariably for precisely the virtuous reasons he would have us believe; and there is no evidence to suppose that he was a mere charlatan.

We have looked at length at two cases from the beginning of Galen’s Roman career. *Praen.* lists several more striking successes that took place over the next few years. They are carefully chosen (confected?) to illustrate different aspects of Galen’s expertise, as well as different stages in his social ascent; and they differ widely in tone. Two of them illustrate Galen’s ability to diagnose psychological

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-52558-9 - The Cambridge Companion to Galen

Edited by R. J. Hankinson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

IO

R. J. HANKINSON

causes of distress, and one involves inference from psychological disturbance to a diagnosis. In the best known, Galen recounts how he diagnosed love-sickness in the wife of Justus.²⁸ He was called in to see the woman, who was suffering from insomnia and despondency, although without other physical symptoms (*Praen.* XIV 630–1, = 100,7–22). Galen's preliminary diagnosis is that she is suffering either from a physiologically based depression caused by black bile,²⁹ or some more directly psychological malaise (XIV 631, = 100,22–102,2). He visits her on successive days, but finds her unwilling to receive him or talk about her complaint (a fact which is in itself diagnostically relevant), but by interrogating her maid he reinforces his provisional conclusion that she is suffering from a kind of grief (XIV 631–2, = 102,2–9), the source of which he discovered 'by chance', when someone happened to enter while he was consulting with the patient, and mention that he had just seen Pylades dancing in the theatre. The woman evinced signs of distress, and Galen immediately took her pulse and found it 'irregular in several ways', a sure sign of mental disturbance. Galen then contrived to check his diagnosis (the woman is hopelessly in love with a dancer) by having the names of other dancers mentioned apparently at random (they produce no effect) and then finally having Pylades' name brought up again, with the same discombobulating results. The diagnosis (although presumably not the cure, which Galen does not mention) is now secure (*Praen.* XIV 632–3, = 102,9–28).

Galen again relies upon a variety of diagnostic observations, and his ability to profit from a lucky chance; also noticeable is his attempt to confirm the initial diagnosis by an empirical test.³⁰ The case is, as Galen admits here and elsewhere, very similar to a celebrated diagnosis made by the third-century BC Alexandrian doctor Erasistratus (and the story falls squarely within a clear romantic tradition).³¹ Galen does not seek to take credit for originality where none is deserved. Indeed, he sees himself as championing (and reviving) the great tradition of medical and scientific explanation that stretches back to Hippocrates, Plato and Aristotle.³² As noted earlier, his association with Peripatetics (although how seriously these upper-class thinkers took their philosophy is another matter) is hardly adventitious, since he himself adopts a version of the Aristotelian account of method and science.³³ Indeed part of what he thinks responsible for the degeneracy of contemporary medicine is